











# **BEST SECRET SERVICE STORIES**

**Edited by John Welcome**

★

**BEST MOTORING STORIES**

**(With Vincent Orchard)**

**BEST HUNTING STORIES**

★

**RUN FOR COVER**

★

**STOP AT NOTHING**

# ***Best Secret Service Stories***

Edited by  
**JOHN WELCOME**

**FABER AND FABER**  
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## Introduction

In making this book I have tried to cast a wide net. It would be easy—all too easy, I think—to compile a simple collection of spy stories. But in a work headed *Best Secret Service Stories* that is not enough, for although the spy is always a secret agent the secret agent is not always a spy. There are, it is true, to be found here what I believe to be two superior examples of the conventional spy story with beautiful *femmes fatales*, secret documents and all the trappings; but for the most part it seemed to me to be important to get away from that convention and to attempt to illustrate in so far as it was possible other aspects of secret service work and, more important still, the differing characters of those called upon to carry it out. So, in this book, Ashenden rubs shoulders with Sherlock Holmes, Buchan's characters with James Bond, an Elizabethan of Mason with a modern of Household and an ultra-modern of Godfrey Smith. None of these would, I think, care to have been called a spy. Their services to their profession and the special missions which they are called upon to carry out are above and beyond the definition of espionage. There is, as well, a "straight" military spy story, one of which it seemed essential to include. It is set in the American Civil War which, with its divided loyalties, its fluid lines and uncertain fronts provided magnificent opportunities for spying and secret service work, opportunities which were mishandled on the Union side by Pinkerton to whom this work was entrusted, and thrown away by aristocratic fecklessness and irresponsibility on the part of the Confederacy. But Marquand's story, which I here reproduce, has, I think, captured both the bravery and tragedy of professional military espionage.

These stories are fiction. There may well be and no doubt are true tales of secret service work stranger and more exciting than any

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included here, but, as such, they are outside my terms of reference. All of them are written by story-tellers and almost all of them would come within the present-day definition of the "thriller". That is to say, if one can arrive at an agreement as to what that definition is. In a recently published book on the craft of the crime story<sup>1</sup> Michael Gilbert and Julian Symons, themselves both distinguished practitioners in the genre, have given their interpretations of the canon in which they write.

Mr. Gilbert draws a distinction—and I hope he will forgive me if I say that I believe it to be a wholly artificial and untenable one—between thrillers and adventure stories, the distinction being, in so far as I can understand it, that in the adventure story there is a series of villains or obstacles to be overcome, in a thriller but one. Apart altogether from the fact that this would appear to push the adventure story into the pigeonhole usually labelled "picaresque novel", it is surely a distinction which cannot be maintained under cross-examination. If a distinction must be drawn (and I believe that it should not and that the words are interchangeable and so I propose to use them), it seems to me that the term "thriller" should be reserved for those books and writers who set out only to excite and are prepared to do this at the expense of character and construction. But Mr. Gilbert is, I am sure, absolutely correct in drawing a firm line of demarcation between thrillers and detective stories.

Mr. Symons (who is an apologist of no mean order and breaking a lance with him is a hazardous business), on the other hand, accepts no such distinction at all. To him a novel, or perhaps I should say a crime novel, is a crime novel and "the pigeonholes so carefully devised in recent years with their labels of *detective story* and *thriller* and *tale of suspense* and *psychological novel* do seem to me to be almost meaningless". Here, I contend that Mr. Symons has gone too far in the other direction, and where Mr. Gilbert divides too much, he divides too little. For I believe that a distinction must be made and that it is wrong to jumble indiscriminately together detective stories and thrillers, as is commonly done to-day. Perhaps, basically, this intermixing springs from the critical contempt into which the craft of story-telling has fallen. The growth in popularity

<sup>1</sup> *Crime in Good Company* (Constable, 1959).



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of the detective story may, however, have done something towards calling that contempt into being. For, although the detective story is and always has been a branch of the narrative tradition, it is, even in its finest examples, to some extent circumscribed and artificial.

However skilfully the writer of a detective story juggles with settings and character, he is still bound to three essentials. There must be a crime (usually violent, usually murder), a search and a dénouement. Thus the detective story creates its own limitations. Whether it is set in the South Seas, Greenwich Village or the library of an English country house, it must still be worked out within that framework. Moreover, that it is in itself fundamentally a puzzle is another factor contributing towards artificiality. The reader is asked to do something which is outside the confines of the ordinary novel. In essence he is being compelled to read on not by the skill of the storyteller but by the urge to find a solution. The detective story is the big brother to the acrostic and the crossword, and this is a relationship entirely foreign to the true lifeblood of the novel. The fact, too, that all the characters must to some degree or other have their lives linked with the murdered man and that a web of suspicion true and false must be woven about them, that clues must be planted and red herrings drawn across the trail are all, again, factors which make for artificiality and which prevent the detective story, however skilfully it is produced, from attaining true stature as a novel.

The writer of thrillers, on the other hand, knows no such limitations. He is a storyteller and he is at large. It may perhaps be claiming too much for it to state that the adventure story is at present the only inheritor of the narrative tradition of English writing; but it is, I think, indisputable that the ordinary novel of the present time, with its tap-roots in Proust and Joyce and its abandonment of plot for theme, has jettisoned narrative altogether and thus contributed largely to the decline in the reading of fiction.

As a matter of fact the literary lineage of the adventure story is by no means an ignoble one. Buchan, "the Master" and incomparably the greatest of them all, derives directly from Stevenson. As a writer Buchan can well stand up to critical attention, and his writing, unlike that of Sapper who was working a coarser stratum of the same vein

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in the same period, has dated extraordinarily little. Even Sapper, at whom it is nowadays easy to sneer, must command some respect as a technician and a craftsman. Mr. Usborne, in his splendid source book on the subject,<sup>1</sup> has called him "the Kipling of the Lower Shell". As a description that could not be bettered. Sapper himself claimed Kipling as his literary progenitor, and it is the debased Kiplingese not only in the language but in what may be called, if it is not too highfalutin' a term to be used in this context, the moral outlook of his stories, which has caused so many of them to date so badly and which indeed prevented the inclusion of any of his secret service stories in this book.

Buchan wrote better than anyone who has ever written in this genre. He was a spellbinder. He wrote a limpid classical prose which, apparently without effort, brought the sights, scenes and scents of places up off the printed page and put them beside the reader. With a touch of his pen he could evoke his beloved Cotswolds or the Highland moors he had walked as a boy or shot over as a man. The potency of this spell was such that, as Mr. Usborne has pointed out, he could exercise it, too, in his descriptions of places to which he had never been, using a letter or a remembered paragraph to assist him in painting a picture as vivid as reality of dawn on the duck-shooting marshes of East Anglia or a market place in the North-West Frontier. He could, too, create character. You may not like Sandy Arbuthnot (along with Mr. Usborne I do not); you may feel that his women are hoydens and old Dick Hannay a bit too good to be true; you may think that in all of them, even in Peter Pienaar and certainly in Hannay, there is a slightly repellent smugness; you may know that each and every one of them totally lacks a sense of humour and takes himself too seriously, but you could walk into any club in St. James's Street to-morrow morning and not be in the least surprised to meet Leithen, Hannay or Sir Walter Bullivant coming out.

In effect Buchan possessed the power of persuasion, which no one can define and which is born in the hand of the writer. He had *in excelsis* the gift of creating a world of his own, of carrying the reader with him into it, and compelling him to read to the end of the story. And he needed it.

<sup>1</sup> *Clubland Heroes* (Constable, 1953).

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No novelist is faultless and, paradoxically enough, Buchan's plots are his weakest point. He could not construct and he used coincidence wholly without scruple. There is extant a theory that *Greenmantle* was written round the idea of Sandy sweeping in triumph through the streets of Constantinople at the head of the Gallipoli Invasion Force and that events caused the ending of this book to suffer a hasty change. Certainly it has the air of an improvisation. And no hero in fiction has blundered into so many helpful or unhelpful situations necessary to carry the story along than Richard Hannay.

These faults of construction are important for one reason if no other. Just as Sapper debased Kipling, many of Buchan's imitators debased him. Lacking his gifts, they relied more and more heavily on sensation and improbability to conceal the defects of their plots. The thriller was on the way back to the bad old days of "the blood", to sensation at the expense of everything else, when Ambler rescued it and made it respectable once more. But Ambler leant over backwards in the other direction. By giving his books solid characterisation, body and bulk, he slowed down the action and, although he restored the adventure story in critical esteem, it may be doubted if ultimately his influence was beneficial to the genre. Again, he founded a school; but again his derivators and imitators, in their turn anxious to preserve this respectability and to retain critical notice, slowed the action almost to a standstill at the call of background, "adulthood" and solidity. Thus they let the baby out with the bathwater and presented us with what were, in effect, inferior novels dressed up as superior thrillers.

And then, in 1953, Mr. Fleming wrote *Casino Royale* and put the blood and thunder (especially the blood) back into the thriller. *Casino Royale* was greeted with cries of critical acclaim, and rightly so. As a book it is, perhaps, easy to fault—its back is broken in the middle when the villain is executed so that all that follows is anti-climax and some of the incidents seem old hat—but it restored to the thriller three of its essential ingredients which were in danger of being sieved out of it—pace, violence and vitality. More important, perhaps, it introduced to English thriller writing the villain as hero. In the person of Sam Spade he had already appeared in America and, no doubt

<sup>1</sup> Ambler, more's the pity, has written no secret service short stories.

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unconsciously, James Bond does seem to owe something to Dasheill Hammett's detective.

Dick Hannay would have despised and disliked James Bond but, whether we like him or not, Bond is the Hannay *de nos jours*.

Hannay was a gentleman and his friends were aristocrats. They clung to what were basically Victorian standards of behaviour. One and all they had the aristocrat's conception that he must be an amateur in everything. Hannay regarded secret service work as "the great game". He played it according to his rules and lights and he reserved to himself the right to refuse to take on an assignment if he so desired. There is no record of his ever receiving payment for his work—a C.B. "for that Erzerum business" was reward enough.

Bond is a professional, a regular secret serviceman, brave, unscrupulous but not very intelligent, dedicated to his task and paid for it (£1,500 a year), accepting each assignment blindly and without demur. Bond is committed.

Bond is frequently, though not altogether fairly, called a cad, chiefly, I imagine, on account of his relations with women, though it was certainly caddish of him to contemplate keeping the £15,000 out of which he had cheated Sir Hugo Drax at Blades. It is the case that he runs through an extraordinary gamut of sexual adventures, and he is without doubt an exceedingly attractive man where women of a particular type are concerned. But it is worth noting that it is he who is usually the seduced not the seducer—"I want it all, James. Everything you've ever done to a girl. Now. Quickly."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, his verbal love-making to the gangster's moll, Tiffany Chase, would not have brought a blush to the cheek of one of Buchan's or Sapper's heroes—men who would turn and run before an advancing foe more readily than go to bed with a woman lacking the sanction of a marriage service.

But, beyond question, Bond is a bounder, and Sandy Arbuthnot would have taken great pleasure in telling him so. All his instincts, appetites and behaviour are of a kind to put him well on the wrong side of what was once called "the boundary line". He dresses flashily; his spare-time occupations are golf, gambling or "making love, with rather cold passion, to one of three similarly disposed married

<sup>1</sup> *Diamonds are Forever.*

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women" (those of Hannay & Co. were fishing and stalking). Bond drinks hard, usually spirits of the smarter sort; he knows little of wine, and when he drinks it it is almost always champagne; he is a rude, aggressive driver of fast cars; his club is Blades, "a kind of White's-plus-Boodles with a brothel attached",<sup>1</sup> which would have horrified Hannay. Finally, when given the opportunity in *From Russia With Love* of "pimping for England", Bond leaps at it. It is inconceivable that Hannay—or Drummond or Jonathan Mansel (heaven forbid!)—would have accepted such a task—or, indeed, that their superiors would have thought of offering it to them. Yet when the assignment came along in 1956 M's thoughts immediately turned to Bond and his choice of operative was unerring. Altogether, remembering Hannay's intolerance of Lancelot Wake—he was an intolerant man, old Dick Hannay; heroes were intolerant in those days—one can well imagine the horror with which he would have regarded Bond and the pleasure he would have taken in black-balling him from the Runagates Club—had Bond indeed been able to find anyone to put him up.

The difference between the two is quite simply this: Hannay, with all his little faults, his prejudices, his incipient pomposity, his pardonable pride in his success and his grand friends, is a likeable, even lovable man; Bond is detestable.

But if Bond has more in common with Buchan's villains than his heroes, Fleming's work, or at least the earlier part of it, can well stand comparison with that of the other master. He writes brilliantly and can etch in a background almost as effectively as Buchan. His pictures of Harlem, Saratoga and the West Indies are splendid even if sometimes they are in danger of becoming set-pieces. His plots are better than Buchan's and so is his construction. Where he is less good is in his delineation of character, for with the exception of Bond all the rest are pasteboard figures. He has given the writing of thrillers a shot in the arm which it badly needed; and in *Moonraker* he has written one of the classics of its kind.

I think it is undeniable that the later Bond books show a sad falling off, dare one suggest because Mr. Fleming at the back of his mind despises his medium and the easy success he has had? But it is

<sup>1</sup> John Raymond, *New Statesman*, 27th April, 1957.

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hard to see how *Moonraker* can be faulted. There is a creditable villain—Mr. Fleming has confessed his difficulties with villains—a tightly-woven plot with no *coups de théâtre* to impede the action; Bond's thoughts are above the navel for most of the time and the whole thing moves at a breathless pace. It is a professional triumph.

Whether Mr. Fleming regards himself as a professional I do not know. It is more likely that he looks on himself as a gifted amateur—"I go to Jamaica and write a Bond book in three weeks". But all the remaining authors here represented are or were professionals to their fingertips.

Maugham, aloof, monolithic, aseptic, needs no introduction from me, but A. E. W. Mason may well be in danger of becoming too soon forgotten. On Intelligence matters Mason, like Maugham, wrote at first-hand, for he had done such work himself. He was a storyteller; he claimed no more for his books than that they be read and enjoyed, and such work is out of fashion nowadays. He wrote too much and he wrote, at times, too hastily; but there is nothing which he wrote which is not worth reading. A handsome, reserved, rather mysterious man, he was fascinated by the theme of failure (usually, though not always, through cowardice) and redemption, and he returned to it again and again. He was also a not inconsiderable historian of Elizabethan England, finding his greatest interest in the contrast between the subtle scheming Walsingham and the "gamier" men of action who put his schemes into practice. His story of an English agent's efforts, to get *News Out of Spain* may be coloured by a romantic's view of history, but it may be none the worse nor, so far as our knowledge of the period extends, none the less true for that.

It was, of course, inevitable that Holmes should be consulted more than once in secret service matters. *The Adventures of the Bruce-Partington Plans* is, I think, an altogether better story than that one which concerns his brush with the Germans in the First World War. It has, too, all the essential Holmes ingredients, even down to brother Mycroft and a London particular; and it recently impelled no less a personage than the City Editor of the *Sunday Times* to travel on foot along the underground to determine whether the train was travelling clockwise or anti-clockwise at the time.

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Compton Mackenzie's story is a gibe engendered by the rough handling he received through the operation of the Official Secrets Act. He, too, has first-hand experience of the work.

The rest of the stories must speak for themselves, save that I have included as the last a spy story by Ambrose Bierce. It concerns death, the ultimate sanction of spies, secret servicemen and of us all.

JOHN WELCOME





## *Miss King*

It was not till the beginning of September that Ashenden, a writer by profession, who had been abroad at the outbreak of the war, managed to get back to England. He chanced soon after his arrival to go to a party and was there introduced to a middle-aged Colonel whose name he did not catch. He had some talk with him. As he was about to leave this officer came up to him and asked:

"I say, I wonder if you'd find coming to see me. I'd rather like to have a chat with you."

"Certainly," said Ashenden. "Whenever you like."

"What about to-morrow at eleven?"

"All right."

"I'll just write down my address. Have you a card on you?"

Ashenden gave him one and on this the Colonel scribbled in pencil the name of a street and the number of a house. When Ashenden walked along next morning to keep his appointment he found himself in a street of rather vulgar red-brick houses in a part of London that had once been fashionable, but was now fallen in the esteem of the house-hunter who wanted a good address. On the house at which Ashenden had been asked to call there was a board up to announce that it was for sale, the shutters were closed and there was no sign that anyone lived in it. He rang the bell and the door was opened by a non-commissioned officer so promptly that he was startled. He was not asked his business, but led immediately into a long room at the back, once evidently a dining-room, the florid decoration of which looked oddly out of keeping with the office furniture, shabby and sparse, that was in it. It gave Ashenden the impression of a room in which the brokers had taken possession. The Colonel, who was known in the Intelligence Department, as Ashenden later discovered,

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by the letter R., rose when he came in and shook hands with him. He was a man somewhat above the middle height, lean, with a yellow, deeply-lined face, thin grey hair and a toothbrush moustache. The thing immediately noticeable about him was the closeness with which his blue eyes were set. He only just escaped a squint. They were hard and cruel eyes, and very wary; and they gave him a cunning, shifty look. Here was a man that you could neither like nor trust at first sight. His manner was pleasant and cordial.

He asked Ashenden a good many questions and then, without further to-do, suggested that he had particular qualifications for the secret service. Ashenden was acquainted with several European languages and his profession was excellent cover; on the pretext that he was writing a book he could without attracting attention visit any neutral country. It was while they were discussing this point that R. said:

"You know you ought to get material that would be very useful to you in your work."

"I shouldn't mind that," said Ashenden.

"I'll tell you an incident that occurred only the other day and I can vouch for its truth. I thought at the time it would make a damned good story. One of the French ministers went down to Nice to recover from a cold and he had some very important documents with him that he kept in a dispatch-case. They were very important indeed. Well, a day or two after he arrived he picked up a yellow-haired lady at some restaurant or other where there was dancing, and he got very friendly with her. To cut a long story short, he took her back to his hotel—of course it was a very imprudent thing to do—and when he came to himself in the morning the lady and the dispatch-case had disappeared. They had one or two drinks up in his room and his theory is that when his back was turned the woman slipped a drug into his glass."

R. finished and looked at Ashenden with a gleam in his close-set eyes.

"Dramatic, isn't it?" he asked.

"Do you mean to say that happened the other day?"

"The week before last."

"Impossible," cried Ashenden. "Why, we've been putting that

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incident on the stage for sixty years, we've written it in a thousand novels. Do you mean to say that life has only just caught up with us?"

R. was a trifle disconcerted.

"Well, if necessary, I could give you names and dates, and believe me, the Allies have been put to no end of trouble by the loss of the documents that the dispatch-case contained."

"Well, sir, if you can't do better than that in the secret service," sighed Ashenden, "I'm afraid that as a source of inspiration to the writer of fiction it's a washout. We really *can't* write that story much longer."

It did not take them long to settle things and when Ashenden rose to go he had already made careful note of his instructions. He was to start for Geneva next day. The last words that R. said to him, with a casualness that made them impressive, were:

"There's just one thing I think you ought to know before you take on this job. And don't forget it. If you do well you'll get no thanks and if you get into trouble you'll get no help. Does that suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"Then I'll wish you good afternoon."

Ashenden was on his way back to Geneva. The night was stormy and the wind blew cold from the mountains, but the stodgy little steamer plodded sturdily through the choppy waters of the lake. A scudding rain, just turning into sleet, swept the deck in angry gusts, like a nagging woman who cannot leave a subject alone. Ashenden had been to France in order to write and despatch a report. A day or two before, about five in the afternoon, an Indian agent of his had come to see him in his rooms; it was only by a lucky chance that he was in, for he had no appointment with him, and the agent's instructions were to come to the hotel only in a case of urgent importance. He told Ashenden that a Bengali in the German service had recently come from Berlin with a black cane trunk in which were a number of documents interesting to the British Government. At that time the Central Powers were doing their best to foment such an agitation in India as would make it necessary for Great Britain to keep their troops in the country and perhaps send

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others from France. It had been found possible to get the Bengali arrested in Berne on a charge that would keep him out of harm's way for a while, but the black cane trunk could not be found. Ashenden's agent was a very brave and very clever fellow and he mixed freely with such of his countrymen as were disaffected to the interests of Great Britain. He had just discovered that the Bengali before going to Berne had, for greater safety, left the trunk in the cloak-room at Zürich Station, and now that he was in jail, awaiting trial, was unable to get the *bulletin* by which it might be obtained into the hands of any of his confederates. It was a matter of great urgency for the German Intelligence Department to secure the contents of the trunk without delay, and since it was impossible for them to get hold of it by the ordinary official means, they had decided to break into the station that very night and steal it. It was a bold and ingenious scheme and Ashenden felt a pleasant exhilaration (for a great deal of his work was uncommonly dull) when he heard of it. He recognised the dashing and unscrupulous touch of the head of the German secret service at Berne. But the burglary was arranged for two o'clock on the following morning and there was not a moment to lose. He could trust neither the telegraph nor the telephone to communicate with the British officer at Berne, and since the Indian agent could not go (he was taking his life in his hands by coming to see Ashenden and if he were noticed leaving his room it might easily be that he would be found one day floating in the lake with a knife-thrust in his back), there was nothing for it but to go himself.

There was a train to Berne that he could just catch and he put on his hat and coat as he ran downstairs. He jumped into a cab. Four hours later he rang the bell of the headquarters of the Intelligence Department. His name was known there but to one person, and it was for him that Ashenden asked. A tall tired-looking man, whom he had not met before, came out and without a word led him into an office. Ashenden told him his errand. The tall man looked at his watch.

"It's too late for us to do anything ourselves. We couldn't possibly get to Zürich in time."

He reflected.

"We'll put the Swiss authorities on the job. They can telephone, and when your friends attempt their little burglary, I have no doubt

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they'll find the station well guarded. Anyhow, you had better get back to Geneva."

He shook hands with Ashenden and showed him out. Ashenden was well aware that he would never know what happened then. Being no more than a tiny rivet in a vast and complicated machine, he never had the advantage of seeing a completed action. He was concerned with the beginning or the end of it, perhaps, or with some incident in the middle, but what his own doings led to he had seldom a chance of discovering. It was as unsatisfactory as those modern novels that give you a number of unrelated episodes and expect you by piecing them together to construct in your mind a connected narrative.

Notwithstanding his fur coat and his muffler, Ashenden was chilled to the bone. It was warm in the saloon and there were good lights to read by, but he thought it better not to sit there in case some habitual traveller, recognising him, wondered why he made these constant journeys between Geneva in Switzerland and Thonon in France; and so, making the best of what shelter could be found, he passed the tedious time in the darkness of the deck. He looked in the direction of Geneva, but could see no lights, and the sleet, turning into snow, prevented him from recognising the landmarks. Lake Lemán, on fine days so trim and pretty, artificial like a piece of water in a French garden, in this tempestuous weather was as secret and as menacing as the sea. He made up his mind that, on getting back to his hotel, he would have a fire lit in his sitting-room, a hot bath, and dinner comfortably by the fireside in pyjamas and a dressing-gown. The prospect of spending an evening by himself with his pipe and a book was so agreeable that it made the misery of that journey across the lake positively worth while. Two sailors tramped past him heavily, their heads bent down to save themselves from the sleet that blew in their faces, and one of them shouted to him: *Nous arrivons*; they went to the side and withdrew a bar to allow passage for the gangway, and looking again Ashenden through the howling darkness saw mistily the lights of the quay. A welcome sight. In two or three minutes the steamer was made fast and Ashenden, muffled to the eyes, joined himself to the little knot of passengers that waited to step ashore. Though he made the journey so often—it was his duty to cross the

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lake into France once a week to deliver his reports and to receive instructions—he had always a faint sense of trepidation when he stood among the crowd at the gangway and waited to land. There was nothing on his passport to show that he had been in France; the steamer went round the lake touching French soil at two places, but going from Switzerland to Switzerland, so that his journey might have been to Vevey or to Lausanne; but he could never be sure that the secret police had not taken note of him, and if he had been followed and seen to land in France, the fact that there was no stamp on his passport would be difficult to explain. Of course he had his story ready, but he well knew that it was not a very convincing one, and though it might be impossible for the Swiss authorities to prove that he was anything but a casual traveller, he might nevertheless spend two or three days in jail, which would be uncomfortable, and then be firmly conducted to the frontier, which would be mortifying. The Swiss knew well that their country was the scene of all manner of intrigues; agents of the secret service, spies, revolutionaries and agitators infested the hotels of the principal towns and, jealous of their neutrality, they were determined to prevent conduct that might embroil them with any of the belligerent powers.

There were as usual two police officers on the quay to watch the passengers disembark and Ashenden, walking past them with as unconcerned an air as he could assume, was relieved when he had got safely by. The darkness swallowed him up and he stepped out briskly for his hotel. The wild weather with a scornful gesture had swept all the neatness from the trim promenade. The shops were closed and Ashenden passed only an occasional pedestrian who sidled along, scrunched up, as though he fled from the blind wrath of the unknown. You had a feeling in that black and bitter night that civilisation, ashamed of its artificiality, cowered before the fury of elemental things. It was hail now that blew in Ashenden's face and the pavement was wet and slippery so that he had to walk with caution. The hotel faced the lake. When he reached it and a page-boy opened the door for him, he entered the hall with a flurry of wind that sent the papers on the porter's desk flying into the air. Ashenden was dazzled by the light. He stopped to ask the porter if there were letters for him. There was nothing, and he was about

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to get into the lift when the porter told him that two gentlemen were waiting in his room to see him. Ashenden had no friends in Geneva.

"Oh?" he answered, not a little surprised. "Who are they?"

He had taken care to get on friendly terms with the porter and his tips for trifling services had been generous. The porter gave a discreet smile.

"There is no harm in telling you. I think they are members of the police."

"What do they want?" asked Ashenden.

"They did not say. They asked me where you were, and I told them you had gone for a walk. They said they would wait till you came back."

"How long have they been there?"

"An hour."

Ashenden's heart sank, but he took care not to let his face betray his concern.

"I'll go up and see them," he said. The liftman stood aside to let him step into the lift, but Ashenden shook his head. "I'm so cold," he said, "I'll walk up."

He wished to give himself a moment to think, but as he ascended the three flights slowly his feet were like lead. There could be small doubt why two police officers were so bent upon seeing him. He felt on a sudden dreadfully tired. He did not feel he could cope with a multitude of questions. And if he were arrested as a secret agent he must spend at least the night in a cell. He longed more than ever for a hot bath and a pleasant dinner by his fireside. He had half a mind to turn tail and walk out of the hotel, leaving everything behind him; he had his passport in his pocket and he knew by heart the hours at which trains started for the frontier: before the Swiss authorities had made up their minds what to do he would be in safety. But he continued to trudge upstairs. He did not like the notion of abandoning his job so easily, he had been sent to Geneva, knowing the risks, to do work of a certain kind, and it seemed to him that he had better go through with it. Of course it would not be very nice to spend two years in a Swiss prison, but the chance of this was, like assassination to kings, one of the inconveniences of his profession.

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He reached the landing of the third floor and walked to his room. Ashenden had in him, it seems, a strain of flippancy (on account of which, indeed, the critics had often reproached him) and as he stood for a moment outside the door his predicament appeared to him on a sudden rather droll. His spirits went up and he determined to brazen the thing out. It was with a genuine smile on his lips that he turned the handle and entering the room faced his visitors.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said.

The room was brightly lit, for all the lights were on, and a fire burned in the hearth. The air was grey with smoke, since the strangers, finding it long to wait for him, had been smoking strong and inexpensive cigars. They sat in their great-coats and bowler-hats as though they had only just that moment come in; but the ashes in the little tray on the table would alone have suggested that they had been long enough there to make themselves familiar with their surroundings. They were two powerful men, with black moustaches, on the stout side, heavily built, and they reminded Ashenden of Fafner and Fasolt, the giants in *The Rhinegold*; their clumsy boots, the massive way they sat in their chairs and the ponderous alertness of their expression, made it obvious that they were members of the detective force. Ashenden gave his room an enveloping glance. He was a neat creature and saw at once that his things, though not in disorder, were not as he had left them. He guessed that an examination had been made of his effects. That did not disturb him, for he kept in his room no document that would compromise him; his code he had learned by heart and destroyed before leaving England, and such communications as reached him from Germany were handed to him by third parties and transmitted without delay to the proper places. There was nothing he need fear in a search, but the impression that it had been made confirmed his suspicion that he had been denounced to the authorities as a secret agent.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked affably. "It's warm in here, wouldn't you like to take off your coats—and hats?"

It faintly irritated him that they should sit there with their hats on.

"We're only staying a minute," said one of them. "We were passing and as the *concierge* said you would be in at once, we thought we would wait."



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He did not remove his hat. Ashenden unwrapped his scarf and disembarrassed himself of his heavy coat.

"Won't you have a cigar?" he asked, offering the box to the two detectives in turn.

"I don't mind if I do," said the first, Fafner, taking one, upon which the second, Fasolt, helped himself without a word, even of thanks.

The name on the box appeared to have a singular effect on their manners, for both now took off their hats.

"You must have had a very disagreeable walk in this bad weather," said Fafner, as he bit half an inch off the end of his cigar and spat it in the fire-place.

Now it was Ashenden's principle (a good one in life as well as in the Intelligence Department) always to tell as much of the truth as he conveniently could; so he answered as follows:

"What do you take me for? I wouldn't go out in such weather if I could help it. I had to go to Vevey to-day to see an invalid friend and I came back by boat. It was bitter on the lake."

"We come from the police," said Fafner casually.

Ashenden thought they must consider him a perfect idiot if they imagined he had not long discovered that, but it was not a piece of information to which it was discreet to reply with a pleasantry.

"Oh, really," he said.

"Have you your passport on you?"

"Yes. In these war-times I think a foreigner is wise always to keep his passport on him."

"Very wise."

Ashenden handed the man the nice new passport, which gave no information about his movements other than that he had come from London three months before and had since then crossed no frontier. The detective looked at it carefully and passed it on to his colleague.

"It appears to be all in order," he said.

Ashenden, standing in front of the fire to warm himself, a cigarette between his lips, made no reply. He watched the detectives warily, but with an expression, he flattered himself, of amiable unconcern. Fasolt handed back the passport to Fafner, who tapped it reflectively with a thick forefinger.

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"The chief of police told us to come here," he said, and Ashenden was conscious that both of them now looked at him with attention, "to make a few enquiries of you."

Ashenden knew that when you have nothing apposite to say it is better to hold your tongue; and when a man has made a remark that calls to his mind for an answer, he is apt to find silence a trifle disconcerting. Ashenden waited for the detective to proceed. He was not quite sure, but it seemed to him that he hesitated.

"It appears that there have been a good many complaints lately of the noise that people make when they come out of the Casino late at night. We wish to know if you personally have been troubled by the disturbance. It is evident that as your rooms look on the lake and the revellers pass your windows, if the noise is serious, you must have heard it."

For an instant Ashenden was dumbfounded. What balderdash was this the detective was talking to him (boom, boom, he heard the big drum as the giant lumbered on the scene), and why on earth should the chief of police send to him to find out if his beauty sleep had been disturbed by vociferous gamblers? It looked very like a trap. But nothing is so foolish as to ascribe profundity to what on the surface is merely inept; it is a pitfall into which many an ingenuous reviewer has fallen headlong. Ashenden had a confident belief in the stupidity of the human animal, which in the course of his life had stood him in good stead. It flashed across him that if the detective asked him such a question it was because he had no shadow of proof that he was engaged in any illegal practice. It was clear that he had been denounced, but no evidence had been offered, and the search of his rooms had been fruitless. But what a silly excuse was this to make for a visit and what a poverty of invention it showed! Ashenden immediately thought of three reasons the detectives might have given for seeking an interview with him and he wished that he were on terms sufficiently familiar with them to make the suggestions. This was really an insult to the intelligence. These men were even stupider than he thought; but Ashenden had always a soft corner in his heart for the stupid and now he looked upon them with a feeling of unexpected kindness. He would have liked to pat them gently. But he answered the question with gravity.

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"To tell you the truth, I am a very sound sleeper (the result doubtless of a pure heart and an easy conscience), and I have never heard a thing."

Ashenden looked at them for the faint smile that he thought his remark deserved, but their countenances remained stolid. Ashenden, as well as an agent of the British Government, was a humorist, and he stifled the beginnings of a sigh. He assumed a slightly imposing air and adopted a more serious tone.

"But even if I had been awakened by noisy people I should not dream of complaining. At a time when there is so much trouble, misery and unhappiness in the world, I cannot but think it very wrong to disturb the amusement of persons who are lucky enough to be able to amuse themselves."

"*En effet*," said the detective. "But the fact remains that people have been disturbed and the chief of police thought the matter should be enquired into."

His colleague, who had hitherto preserved a silence that was positively sphinx-like, now broke it.

"I notice by your passport that you are an author, *monsieur*," he said.

Ashenden in reaction from his previous perturbation was feeling exceedingly debonair and he answered with good humour:

"It is true. It is a profession full of tribulation, but it has now and then its compensations."

"*La gloire*," said Fafner politely.

"Or shall we say notoriety?" hazarded Ashenden.

"And what are you doing in Geneva?"

The question was put so pleasantly that Ashenden felt it behoved him to be on his guard. A police officer amiable is more dangerous to the wise than a police officer aggressive.

"I am writing a play," said Ashenden.

He waved his hand to the papers on his table. Four eyes followed his gesture. A casual glance told him that the detectives had looked and taken note of his manuscripts.

"And why should you write a play here rather than in your own country?"

Ashenden smiled upon them with even more affability than before,

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since this was a question for which he had long been prepared, and it was a relief to give the answer. He was curious to see how it would go down.

"*Mais, monsieur*, there is a war. My country is in a turmoil, it would be impossible to sit there quietly and write a play."

"Is it a comedy or a tragedy?"

"Oh, a comedy, and a light one at that," replied Ashenden. "The artist needs peace and quietness. How do you expect him to preserve that detachment of spirit that is demanded by creative work unless he can have perfect tranquillity? Switzerland has the good fortune to be neutral, and it seemed to me that in Geneva I should find the very surroundings I wanted."

Fafner nodded slightly to Fasolt, but whether to indicate that he thought Ashenden an imbecile or whether in sympathy with his desire for a safe retreat from a turbulent world, Ashenden had no means of knowing. Anyhow the detective evidently came to the conclusion that he could learn nothing more from talking to Ashenden, for his remarks grew now desultory and in a few minutes he rose to go.

When Ashenden, having warmly shaken their hands, closed the door behind the pair he heaved a great sign of relief. He turned on the water for his bath, as hot as he thought he could possibly bear it, and as he undressed reflected comfortably over his escape.

The day before, an incident had occurred that had left him on his guard. There was in his service a Swiss, known in the Intelligence Department as Bernard, who had recently come from Germany, and Ashenden had instructed him to go to a certain café desiring to see him, at a certain time. Since he had not seen him before, so that there might be no mistake he had informed him through an intermediary what question himself would ask and what reply he was to give. He chose the luncheon hour for the meeting, since then the café was unlikely to be crowded, and it chanced that on entering he saw but one man of about the age he knew Bernard to be. He was by himself and going up to him Ashenden casually put to him the pre-arranged question. The pre-arranged answer was given, and sitting down, beside him, Ashenden ordered himself a Dubonnet. The spy was a stocky little fellow, shabbily dressed, with a bullet-

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shaped head, close-cropped, fair, with shifty blue eyes and a sallow skin. He did not inspire confidence, and but that Ashenden knew by experience how hard it was to find men willing to go into Germany he would have been surprised that his predecessor had engaged him. He was a German-Swiss and spoke French with a strong accent. He immediately asked for his wages and these Ashenden passed over to him in an envelope. They were in Swiss francs. He gave a general account of his stay in Germany and answered Ashenden's careful questions. He was by calling a waiter and had found a job in a restaurant near one of the Rhine bridges, which gave him good opportunity to get the information that was required of him. His reasons for coming to Switzerland for a few days were plausible and there could apparently be no difficulty in his crossing the frontier on his return. Ashenden expressed his satisfaction with his behaviour, gave him his orders and was prepared to finish the interview.

"Very good," said Bernard. "But before I go back to Germany I want two thousand francs."

"Do you?"

"Yes, and I want them now, before you leave this café. It's a sum I have to pay, and I've got to have it." •

"I'm afraid I can't give it to you."

A scowl made the man's face even more unpleasant to look at than it was before.

"You've got to."

"What makes you think that?"

The spy leaned forward and, not raising his voice, but speaking so that only Ashenden could hear, burst out angrily:

"Do you think I'm going on risking my life for that beggarly sum you give me? Not ten days ago a man was caught at Mainz and shot. Was that one of your men?"

"We haven't got anyone at Mainz," said Ashenden, carelessly, and for all he knew it was true. He had been puzzled not to receive his usual communications from that place and Bernard's information might afford the explanation. "You knew exactly what you were to get when you took on the job, and if you weren't satisfied you needn't have taken it. I have no authority to give you a penny more."

"Do you see what I've got here?" said Bernard.

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He took a small revolver out of his pocket and fingered it significantly.

"What are you going to do with it? Pawn it?"

With an angry shrug of the shoulders he put it back in his pocket. Ashenden reflected that had he known anything of the technique of the theatre Bernard would have been aware that it was useless to make a gesture that had no ulterior meaning.

"You refuse to give me the money?"

"Certainly."

The spy's manner, which at first had been obsequious, was now somewhat truculent, but he kept his head and never for a moment raised his voice. Ashenden could see that Bernard, however big a ruffian, was a reliable agent, and he made up his mind to suggest to R. that his salary should be raised. The scene diverted him. A little way off two fat citizens of Geneva, with black beards, were playing dominoes, and on the other side, a young man with spectacles was with great rapidity writing sheet after sheet of an immensely long letter. A Swiss family (who knows, perhaps Robinson by name), consisting of a father and mother and four children, were sitting round a table making the best of two small cups of coffee. The *caissière* behind the counter, an imposing brunette with a large bust encased in black silk, was reading the local paper. The surroundings made the melodramatic scene in which Ashenden was engaged perfectly grotesque. His own play seemed to him much more real.

Bernard smiled. His smile was not engaging.

"Do you know that I have only to go to the police and tell them about you to have you arrested? Do you know what a Swiss prison is like?"

"No, I've often wondered lately. Do you?"

"Yes, and you wouldn't much like it."

One of the things that had bothered Ashenden was the possibility that he would be arrested before he finished his play. He disliked the notion of leaving it half done for an indefinite period. He did not know whether he would be treated as a political prisoner or as a common criminal and he had a mind to ask Bernard whether in the latter case (the only one Bernard was likely to know anything about) he would be allowed writing materials. He was afraid Bernard would

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think the inquiry an attempt to laugh at him. But he was feeling comparatively at ease and was able to answer Bernard's threat without heat.

"You could of course get me sentenced to two years' imprisonment."

"At least."

"No, that is the maximum, I understand, and I think it is quite enough. I won't conceal from you that I should find it extremely disagreeable. But not nearly so disagreeable as you would."

"What could you do?"

"Oh, we'd get you somehow. And after all, the war won't last for ever. You are a waiter, you want your freedom of action. I promise you that if I get into any trouble, you will never be admitted into any of the allied countries for the rest of your life. I can't help thinking it would cramp your style."

Bernard did not reply, but looked down sulkily at the marble-topped table. Ashenden thought this was the moment to pay for the drinks and go.

"Think it over, Bernard," he said. "If you want to go back to your job, you have your instructions, and your usual wages shall be paid through the usual channels."

The spy shrugged his shoulders, and Ashenden, though not knowing in the least what was the result of their conversation, felt that it behoved him to walk out with dignity. He did so.

And now as he carefully put one foot into the bath, wondering if he could bear it, he asked himself what Bernard had in the end decided on. The water was just not scalding and he gradually let himself down into it. On the whole it seemed to him that the spy had thought it would be as well to go straight, and the source of his denunciation must be looked for elsewhere. Perhaps in the hotel itself. Ashenden lay back, and as his body grew used to the heat of the water gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"Really," he reflected, "there are moments in life when all this to-do that has led from the primeval slime to myself seems almost worth while."

Ashenden could not but think he was lucky to have wriggled out of the fix he had found himself in that afternoon. Had he been

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arrested and in due course sentenced R., shrugging his shoulders, would merely have called him a damned fool and set about looking for someone to take his place. Already Ashenden knew his chief well enough to be aware that when he had told him that if he got into trouble he need look for no help he meant exactly what he said.

Ashenden, lying comfortably in his bath, was glad to think that in all probability he would be able to finish his play in peace. The police had drawn a blank and though they might watch him from now on with some care it was unlikely that they would take a further step until he had at least roughed out his third act. It behooved him to be prudent (only a fortnight ago his colleague at Lausanne had been sentenced to a term of imprisonment), but it would be foolish to be alarmed: his predecessor in Geneva, seeing himself, with an exaggerated sense of his own importance, shadowed from morning till night, had been so affected by the nervous strain that it had been found necessary to withdraw him. Twice a week Ashenden had to go to the market to receive instructions that were brought to him by an old peasant woman from French Savoy who sold butter and eggs. She came in with the other market-women and the search at the frontier was perfunctory. It was barely dawn when they crossed and the officials were only too glad to have done quickly with these chattering noisy women and get back to their warm fires and their cigars. Indeed this old lady looked so bland and innocent, with her corpulence, her fat red face, and her smiling good-natured mouth, it would have been a very astute detective who could imagine that if he took the trouble to put his hand deep down between those voluminous breasts of hers, he would find a little piece of paper that would land in the dock an honest old woman (who kept her son out of the trenches by taking this risk) and an English writer approaching middle-age. Ashenden went to market about nine when the housewives of Geneva for the most part had done their provisioning, stopped in front of the basket by the side of which, rain or wind, hot or cold, sat that indomitable creature and bought half a pound of butter. She slipped the note into his hand when he was given change for ten francs and he sauntered away. His only moment of risk was when he walked back to his hotel with the paper in his



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pocket, and after this scare he made up his mind to shorten as much as possible the period during which it could be found on him.

Ashenden sighed, for the water was no longer quite so hot; he could not reach the tap with his hand nor could he turn it with his toes (as every properly regulated tap should turn) and if he got up enough to add more hot water he might just as well get out altogether. On the other hand he could not pull out the plug with his foot in order to empty the bath and so force himself to get out, nor could he find in himself the will-power to step out of it like a man. He had often heard people tell him that he possessed character and he reflected that people judge hastily in the affairs of life because they judge on insufficient evidence: they had never seen him in a hot, but diminishingly hot, bath. His mind, however, wandered back to his play, and telling himself jokes and repartees that he knew by bitter experience would never look so neat on paper nor sound so well on the stage as they did then, he abstracted his mind from the fact that his bath was growing almost tepid, when he heard a knock at the door. Since he did not want anyone to enter, he had the presence of mind not to say "come in," but the knocking was repeated.

"Who is it?" he cried irascibly.

"A letter."

"Come in then. Wait a minute."

Ashenden heard his bedroom door open and getting out of the bath flung a towel round him and went in. A page-boy was waiting with a note. It needed only a verbal answer. It was from a lady staying in the hotel asking him to play bridge after dinner and was signed in the continental fashion *Baronne de Higgins*. Ashenden, longing for a cosy meal in his own room, in slippers and with a book leaned up against a reading-lamp, was about to refuse when it occurred to him that under the circumstances it might be discreet to show himself in the dining-room that night. It was absurd to suppose that in that hotel the news would not have spread that he had been visited by the police and it would be as well to prove to his fellow-guests that he was not disconcerted. It had passed through his mind that it might be someone in the hotel who had denounced him and indeed the name of the sprightly baroness had not failed to suggest itself to him. If it was she who had given him away there would be a

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certain humour in playing bridge with her. He gave the boy a message that he would be pleased to come and proceeded slowly to don his evening clothes.

The Baroness von Higgins was an Austrian, who on settling in Geneva during the first winter of the war, had found it convenient to make her name look as French as possible. She spoke English and French perfectly. Her surname, so far from Teutonic, she owed to her grandfather, a Yorkshire stable-boy, who had been taken over to Austria by a Prince Blankenstein early in the nineteenth century. He had had a charming and romantic career; a very good-looking young man, he attracted the attention of one of the arch-duchesses and then made such good use of his opportunities that he ended his life as a baron and minister plenipotentiary to an Italian court. The baroness, his only descendant, after an unhappy marriage, the particulars of which she was fond of relating to her acquaintance, had resumed her maiden name. She mentioned not infrequently the fact that her grandfather had been an ambassador, but never that he had been a stable-boy, and Ashenden had learned this interesting detail from Vienna; for as he grew friendly with her he had thought it necessary to get a few particulars about her past, and he knew among other things that her private income did not permit her to live on the somewhat lavish scale on which she was living in Geneva. Since she had so many advantages for espionage, it was fairly safe to suppose that an alert secret service had enlisted her services and Ashenden took it for granted that she was engaged somehow on the same kind of work as himself. It increased if anything the cordiality of his relations with her.

When he went into the dining-room it was already full. He sat down at his table and feeling jaunty after his adventure ordered himself (at the expense of the British Government) a bottle of champagne. The baroness gave him a flashing, brilliant smile. She was a woman of more than forty, but in a hard and glittering manner extremely beautiful. She was a high-coloured blonde with golden hair of a metallic lustre, lovely no doubt but not attractive, and Ashenden had from the first reflected that it was not the sort of hair you would like to find in your soup. She had fine features, blue eyes, a straight nose, and a pink and white skin, but her skin was stretched

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over her bones a trifle tightly; she was generously *décolletée* and her white and ample bosom had the quality of marble. There was nothing in her appearance to suggest the yielding tenderness that the susceptible find so alluring. She was magnificently gowned, but scantily bejewelled, so that Ashenden, who knew something of these matters, concluded that the superior authority had given her *carte blanche* at a dressmaker's but had not thought it prudent or necessary to provide her with rings or pearls. She was notwithstanding so showy that but for R.'s story of the minister, Ashenden would have thought the sight of her alone must have aroused in anyone on whom she desired to exercise her wiles, the sense of prudence.

While he waited for his dinner to be served, Ashenden cast his eyes over the company. Most of the persons gathered were old friends by sight. At that time Geneva was a hot-bed of intrigue and its home was the hotel at which Ashenden was staying. There were Frenchmen there, Italians and Russians, Turks, Rumanians, Greeks and Egyptians. Some had fled their country, some doubtless represented it. There was a Bulgarian, an agent of Ashenden's, whom for greater safety he had never even spoken to in Geneva; he was dining that night with two fellow-countrymen and in a day or so, if he was not killed in the interval, might have a very interesting communication to make. Then there was a little German prostitute, with china-blue eyes and a doll-like face, who made frequent journeys along the lake and up to Berne, and in the exercise of her profession got little titbits of information over which doubtless they pondered with deliberation in Berlin. She was of course of a different class from the baroness and hunted much easier game. But Ashenden was surprised to catch sight of Count von Holzminden and wondered what on earth he was doing there. This was the German agent in Vevey and he came over to Geneva only on occasion. Once Ashenden had seen him in the old quarter of the city, with its silent houses and deserted streets, talking at a corner to a man whose appearance very much suggested the spy and he would have given a great deal to hear what they said to one another. It had amused him to come across the Count, for in London before the war he had known him fairly well. He was of great family and indeed related to the Hohenzollerns. He was fond of England; he danced well, rode well and shot

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well; people said he was more English than the English. He was a tall, thin fellow, in well-cut clothes, with a close-cropped Prussian head, and that peculiar bend of the body as though he were just about to bow to a royalty that you feel, rather than see, in those who have spent their lives about a court. He had charming manners and was much interested in the Fine Arts. But now Ashenden and he pretended they had never seen one another before. Each of course knew on what work the other was engaged and Ashenden had had a mind to chaff him about it—it seemed absurd when he had dined with a man off and on for years and played cards with him, to act as though he did not know him from Adam—but refrained in case the German looked upon his behaviour as further proof of the British frivolity in face of war. Ashenden was perplexed. Holzminden had never set foot in that hotel before and it was unlikely that he had done so now without good reason.

Ashenden asked himself whether this event had anything to do with the unusual presence in the dining-room of Prince Ali. At that juncture it was imprudent to ascribe any occurrence, however accidental it looked, to the hazard of coincidence. Prince Ali was an Egyptian, a near relation of the Khedive, who had fled his country when the Khedive was deposed. He was a bitter enemy of the English and was known to be actively engaged in stirring up trouble in Egypt. The week before, the Khedive in great secrecy had passed three days at the hotel and the pair of them had held constant meetings in the Prince's apartments. He was a little fat man with a heavy black moustache. He was living with his two daughters and a certain Pasha, Mustapha by name, who was his secretary and managed his affairs. The four of them were now dining together; they drank a great deal of champagne, but sat in a stolid silence. The two young princesses were emancipated young women who spent their nights dancing in restaurants with the bloods of Geneva. They were short and stout, with fine black eyes and heavy sallow faces; and they were dressed with a rich loudness that suggested the Fish-market at Cairo rather than the Rue de la Paix. His Highness usually ate upstairs but the princesses dined every evening in the public dining-room: they were chaperoned vaguely by a little old Englishwoman, a Miss King, who had been their governess; but she

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sat at a table by herself and they appeared to pay no attention to her. Once Ashenden, going along a corridor, had come upon the elder of the two fat princesses berating the governess in French with a violence that took his breath away. She was shouting at the top of her voice and suddenly smacked the old woman's face. When she caught sight of Ashenden she gave him a furious look and flinging into her room slammed the door. He walked on as though he had noticed nothing.

On his arrival Ashenden had tried to scrape acquaintance with Miss King, but she had received his advances not merely with frigidity but with churlishness. He had begun by taking off his hat when he met her, and she had given him a stiff bow, then he had addressed her and she had answered with such brevity that it was evident that she wished to have nothing much to do with him. But it was not his business to be discouraged, so with what assurance he could muster he took the first opportunity to enter into conversation with her. She drew herself up and said in French, but with an English accent:

"I don't wish to make acquaintance with strangers."

She turned her back on him and next time he saw her, cut him dead.

She was a tiny old woman, just a few little bones in a bag of wrinkled skin, and her face was deeply furrowed. It was obvious that she wore a wig, it was of a mousy brown, very elaborate and not always set quite straight, and she was heavily made up, with great patches of scarlet on her withered cheeks and brilliantly red lips. She dressed fantastically in gay clothes that looked as though they had been bought higgledy-piggledy from an old-clothes shop and in the daytime she wore enormous, extravagantly girlish hats. She tripped along in very small smart shoes with very high heels. Her appearance was so grotesque that it created consternation rather than amusement. People turned in the street and stared at her with open mouths.

Ashenden was told that Miss King had not been to England since she was first engaged as governess of the prince's mother and he could not but be amazed to think of all she must have seen during those long years in the harems of Cairo. It was impossible to guess how old she was. How many of those short Eastern lives must have

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run their course under her eyes and what dark secrets must she have known! Ashenden wondered where she came from; an exile from her own country for so long, she must possess in it neither family nor friends: he knew that her sentiments were anti-English and if she had answered him so rudely he surmised that she had been told to be on her guard against him. She never spoke anything but French. Ashenden wondered what it was she thought of as she sat there, for luncheon and dinner, by herself. He wondered if she ever read. After meals she went straight upstairs and was never seen in the public sitting-rooms. He wondered what she thought of those two emancipated princesses who wore garish frocks and danced with strange men in second-rate cafés. But when Miss King passed him on her way out of the dining-room it seemed to Ashenden that her mask of a face scowled. She appeared actively to dislike him. Her gaze met his and the pair of them looked at one another for a moment; he imagined that she tried to put into her stare an unspoken insult. It would have been pleasantly absurd in that painted, withered visage if it had not been for some reason rather oddly pathetic.

But now the Baroness de Higgins, having finished her dinner, gathered up her handkerchief and her bag, and with waiters bowing on either side sailed down the spacious room. She stopped at Ashenden's table. She looked magnificent.

"I'm so glad you can play bridge to-night," she said in her perfect English, with no more than a trace of German accent. "Will you come to my sitting-room when you are ready and have your coffee?"

"What a lovely dress," said Ashenden.

"It is frightful. I have nothing to wear, I don't know what I shall do now that I cannot go to Paris. Those horrible Prussians," and her r's grew guttural as she raised her voice, "why did they want to drag my poor country into this terrible war?"

She gave a sigh, and a flashing smile, and sailed on. Ashenden was among the last to finish and when he left the dining-room it was almost empty. As he walked past Count Holzminden, Ashenden feeling very gay hazarded the shadow of a wink. The German agent could not be quite sure of it and if he suspected it might rack his brains to discover what mystery it portended. Ashenden walked up to the second floor and knocked at the baroness's door.

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"*Entrez, entrez,*" she said and flung it open.

She shook both his hands with cordiality and drew him into the room. He saw that the two persons who were to make the four had already arrived. They were Prince Ali and his secretary. Ashenden was astounded.

"Allow me to introduce Mr. Ashenden to your Highness," said the baroness, speaking in her fluent French.

Ashenden bowed and took the proffered hand. The Prince gave him a quick look, but did not speak. Madame de Higgins went on:

"I do not know if you have met the Pasha."

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Ashenden," said the Prince's secretary, warmly shaking his hand. "Our beautiful baroness has talked to us of your bridge and His Highness is devoted to the game. *N'est-ce pas, Altesse?*"

"*Oui, oui,*" said the Prince.

Mustapha Pasha was a huge fat fellow, of forty-five perhaps, with large mobile eyes and a big black moustache. He wore a dinner-jacket with a large diamond in his shirt-front and the *tarboosh* of his country. He was exceedingly voluble, and the words tumbled out of his mouth tumultuously, like marbles out of a bag. He took pains to be extremely civil to Ashenden. The Prince sat in silence, looking at Ashenden quietly from under his heavy eyelids. He seemed shy.

"I have not seen you at the club, *Monsieur,*" said the Pasha. "Do you not like baccarat?"

"I play but seldom."

"The baroness, who has read everything, tells me that you are a remarkable writer. Unfortunately I do not read English."

The baroness paid Ashenden some very fulsome compliments, to which he listened with a proper and grateful politeness, and then, having provided her guests with coffee and liqueurs, she produced the cards. Ashenden could not but wonder why he had been asked to play. He had (he flattered himself) few illusions about himself, and so far as bridge was concerned none. He knew that he was a good player of the second class, but he had played often enough with the best players in the world to know that he was not in the same street with them. The game played now was contract, with which he was not very familiar, and the stakes were high; but the game was obviously

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but a pretext and Ashenden had no notion what other game was being played under the rose. It might be that knowing he was a British agent the Prince and his secretary had desired to see him in order to find out what sort of person he was. Ashenden had felt for a day or two that something was in the air and this meeting confirmed his suspicions, but he had not the faintest notion of what nature this something was. His spies had told him of late nothing that signified. He was now persuaded that he owed that visit of the Swiss police to the kindly intervention of the baroness and it looked as though the bridge party had been arranged when it was discovered that the detectives had been able to do nothing. The notion was mysterious, but diverting, and as Ashenden played one rubber after another, joining in the incessant conversation, he watched what was said by himself no less closely than what was said by the others. The war was spoken of a good deal and the baroness and the Pasha expressed very anti-German sentiments. The baroness's heart was in England whence her family (the stable-boy from Yorkshire) had sprung and the Pasha looked upon Paris as his spiritual home. When the Pasha talked of Montmartre and its life by night the Prince was roused from his silence.

*"C'est une bien belle ville, Paris,"* he said.

"The Prince has a beautiful apartment there," said his secretary, "with beautiful pictures and life-sized statues."

Ashenden explained that he had the greatest sympathy for the national aspirations of Egypt and that he looked upon Vienna as the most pleasing capital in Europe. He was as friendly to them as they were to him. But if they were under the impression that they would get any information out of him that they had not already seen in the Swiss papers he had a notion that they were mistaken. At one moment he had a suspicion that he was being sounded upon the possibility of selling himself. It was done so discreetly that he could not be quite sure, but he had a feeling that a suggestion floated in the air that a clever writer could do his country a good turn and make a vast amount of money for himself if he cared to enter into an arrangement that would bring to a troubled world the peace that every humane man must so sincerely desire. It was plain that nothing very much would be said that first evening, but Ashenden as evasively as



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he could, more by general amiability than by words, tried to indicate that he was willing to hear more of the subject. While he talked with the Pasha and the beautiful Austrian he was conscious that the watchful eyes of Prince Ali were upon him, and he had an uneasy suspicion that they read too much of his thoughts. He felt rather than knew that the Prince was an able and astute man. It was possible that after he left them the Prince would tell the other two that they were wasting their time and there was nothing to be done with Ashenden.

Soon after midnight, a rubber having been finished, the Prince rose from the table.

"It is getting late," he said, "and Mr. Ashenden has doubtless much to do to-morrow. We must not keep him up."

Ashenden looked upon this as a signal to take himself off. He left the three together to discuss the situation and retired not a little mystified. He could only trust that they were no less puzzled than he. When he got to his room he suddenly realised that he was dog-tired. He could hardly keep his eyes open while he undressed, and the moment he flung himself into bed he fell asleep.

He would have sworn that he had not been asleep five minutes when he was dragged back to wakefulness by a knocking at the door. He listened for a moment.

"Who is it?"

"It's the maid. Open. I have something to say to you."

Cursing, Ashenden turned on his light, ran a hand through his thinning and rumpled hair (for like Julius Cæsar he disliked exposing an unbecoming baldness) and unlocked and opened the door. Outside it stood a tousled Swiss maid. She wore no apron and looked as though she had thrown on her clothes in a hurry.

"The old English lady, the governess of the Egyptian princesses, is dying and she wants to see you."

"Me?" said Ashenden. "It's impossible. I don't know her. She was all right this evening."

He was confused and spoke his thoughts as they came to him.

"She asks for you. The doctor says, will you come? She cannot last much longer."

"It must be a mistake. She can't want me."

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"She said your name and the number of your room. She says: quick, quick."

Ashenden shrugged his shoulders. He went back into his room to put on slippers and a dressing-gown, and as an after-thought dropped a small revolver into his pocket. Ashenden believed much more in his acuteness than in a firearm, which is apt to go off at the wrong time and make a noise, but there are moments when it gives you confidence to feel your fingers round its butt, and this sudden summons seemed to him exceedingly mysterious. It was ridiculous to suppose that those two cordial stout Egyptian gentlemen were laying some sort of trap for him, but in the work upon which Ashenden was engaged the dullness of routine was apt now and again to slip quite shamelessly into the melodrama of the 'sixties. Just as passion will make use brazenly of the hackneyed phrase, so will chance show itself insensitive to the triteness of the literary convention.

Miss King's room was two floors higher than Ashenden's, and as he accompanied the chamber-maid along the corridor and up the stairs he asked her what was the matter with the old governess. She was flurried and stupid.

"I think she has had a stroke. I don't know. The night-porter woke me and said Monsieur Bridet wanted me to get up at once."

Monsieur Bridet was the assistant-manager.

"What is the time?" asked Ashenden.

"It must be three o'clock."

They arrived at Miss King's door and the maid knocked. It was opened by Monsieur Bridet. He had evidently been roused from his sleep; he wore slippers on his bare feet, grey trousers and a frock-coat over his pyjamas. He looked absurd. His hair as a rule plastered neatly on his head stood on end. He was extremely apologetic.

"A thousand excuses for disturbing you, Monsieur Ashenden, but she kept asking for you and the doctor said you should be sent for."

"It doesn't matter at all."

Ashenden walked in. It was a small back room and all the lights were on. The windows were closed and the curtains drawn. It was intensely hot. The doctor, a bearded, grizzled Swiss, was standing at the bedside. Monsieur Bridet, notwithstanding his costume and his evident harassment, found in himself the presence of mind to remain

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the attentive manager, and with ceremony effected the proper introduction.

"This is Mr. Ashenden, for whom Miss King has been asking. Dr. Arbos of the Faculty of Medicine of Geneva."

Without a word the doctor pointed to the bed. On it lay Miss King. It gave Ashenden a shock to look at her. She wore a large white cotton night-cap (on entering Ashenden had noticed the brown wig on a stand on the dressing-table) tied under the chin and a white, voluminous nightdress that came high up in the neck. Night-cap and nightdress belonged to a past age and reminded you of Cruikshank's illustrations to the novels of Charles Dickens. Her face was greasy still with the cream she had used before going to bed to remove her make-up, but she had removed it summarily and there were streaks of black on her eyebrows and of red on her cheeks. She looked very small, lying in the bed, no larger than a child, and immensely old.

"She must be well over eighty," thought Ashenden.

She did not look human, but like a doll, the caricature of an old, old witch that an ironic toymaker had amused himself with modelling. She lay perfectly still on her back, the tiny little body hardly marked under the flatness of the blanket, her face even smaller than usual because she had removed her teeth; and you would have thought she was dead but for the black eyes, strangely large in the shrunken mask, that stared unblinkingly. Ashenden thought their expression changed when she saw him.

"Well, Miss King, I'm sorry to see you like this," he said with forced cheerfulness.

"She cannot speak," said the doctor. "She had another little stroke when the maid went to fetch you. I have just given her an injection. She may partly recover the use of her tongue in a little while. She has something to say to you."

"I will gladly wait," said Ashenden.

He fancied that in those dark eyes he saw a look of relief. For a moment or two the four of them stood round the bed and stared at the dying woman.

"Well, if there is nothing I can do, I may just as well go back to bed," said Monsieur Bridet then.

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*"Allez, mon ami,"* said the doctor. "You can do nothing."

Monsieur Bridet turned to Ashenden.

"May I have a word with you?" he asked.

"Certainly."

The doctor noticed a sudden fear in Miss King's eyes.

"Do not be alarmed," he said kindly. "Monsieur Ashenden is not going. He will stay as long as you wish."

The assistant-manager took Ashenden to the door and partly closed it so that those within should not hear his undertones.

"I can count on your discretion, Monsieur Ashenden, can I not? It is a very disagreeable thing to have anyone die in a hotel. The other guests do not like it and we must do all we can to prevent their knowing. I shall have the body removed the first possible moment and I shall be extremely obliged if you will not say that there has been a death."

"You can have every confidence in me," said Ashenden.

"It is very unfortunate that the manager should be away for the night. I am afraid he will be exceedingly displeased. Of course if it had been possible I would have sent for an ambulance and had her taken to the hospital, but the doctor said she might die before we got her downstairs and absolutely refused to let me. It is not my fault if she dies in the hotel."

"Death so often chooses its moments without consideration," murmured Ashenden.

"After all she is an old woman, she should have died years ago. What did this Egyptian prince want to have a governess of that age for? He ought to have sent her back to her own country. These Orientals, they are always giving trouble."

"Where is the Prince now?" asked Ashenden. "She has been in his service for many years. Ought you not to wake him?"

"He is not in the hotel. He went out with his secretary. He may be playing baccarat. I do not know. Anyhow I cannot send all over Geneva to find him."

"And the princesses?"

"They have not come in. They seldom return to the hotel till dawn. They are mad about dancing. I do not know where they are and in any case they would not thank me for dragging them away

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from their diversions, because their governess has had a stroke, I know what they are. The night-porter will tell them when they arrive and then they can please themselves. She does not want them. When the night-porter fetched me and I went into her room I asked where his highness was and she cried with all her strength: no, no."

"She could talk then?"

"Yes, after a fashion, but the thing that surprised me was that she spoke in English. She always insisted on talking French. You know, she hated the English."

"What did she want with me?"

"That I cannot tell you. She said she had something that she must say to you at once. It is funny, she knew the number of your room. At first when she asked for you I would not let them send. I cannot have my clients disturbed in the middle of the night because a crazy old woman asks for them. You have the right to your sleep, I imagine. But when the doctor came he insisted. She gave us no peace and when I said she must wait till morning she cried."

Ashenden looked at the assistant-manager. He seemed to find nothing at all touching in the scene he related.

"The doctor asked who you were and when I told him he said that perhaps she wished to see you because you were a compatriot."

"Perhaps," said Ashenden dryly.

"Well, I shall try to get a little sleep. I shall give the night-porter orders to wake me when everything is over. Fortunately the nights are long now and if everything goes well we may be able to get the body away before it is light."

Ashenden went back into the room and immediately the dark eyes of the dying woman fixed upon him. He felt that it was incumbent upon him to say something, but as he spoke he reflected on the foolish way in which one speaks to the sick.

"I'm afraid you're feeling very ill, Miss King."

It seemed to him that a flash of anger crossed her eyes and Ashenden could not but imagine that she was exasperated by his futile words.

"You do not mind waiting?" asked the doctor.

"Of course not."

It appeared that the night-porter had been roused by the ringing

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of the telephone from Miss King's room, but on listening could get no one to speak. The bell continued to ring, so he went upstairs and knocked at the door. He entered with his pass-key and found Miss King lying on the floor. The telephone had fallen too. It looked as though, feeling ill, she had taken off the receiver to call for help and then collapsed. The night-porter hurried to fetch the assistant-manager and together they had lifted her back into bed. Then the maid was wakened and the doctor sent for. It gave Ashenden a queer feeling to listen to the doctor giving him these facts in Miss King's hearing. He spoke as though she could not understand his French. He spoke as though she were already dead.

Then the doctor said:

"Well, there is really nothing more that I can do. It is useless for me to stay. I can be rung up if there is any change."

Ashenden, knowing that Miss King might remain in that condition for hours, shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well."

The doctor patted her raddled cheek as though she were a child.

"You must try to sleep. I will come back in the morning."

He packed up the dispatch-case in which he had his medical appliances, washed his hands and shuffled himself into a heavy coat. Ashenden accompanied him to the door and as he shook hands the doctor gave his prognosis in a pout of his bearded mouth. Ashenden, coming back, looked at the maid. She sat on the edge of a chair, uneasily, as though in the presence of death she feared to presume. Her broad, ugly face was bloated with fatigue.

"There's no use in your staying up," Ashenden said to her. "Why don't you go to bed?"

"*Monsieur* wouldn't like to remain here alone. Somebody must stay with him."

"But good heavens, why? You have your day's work to do to-morrow."

"In any case I have to get up at five."

"Then try to get a little sleep now. You can give me a look in when you get up. *Allez.*"

She rose heavily to her feet.

"As the gentleman wishes. But I will stay very willingly."

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Ashenden smiled and shook his head.

*"Bonsoir, ma pauvre mademoiselle,"* said the maid.

She went out and Ashenden was left alone. He sat by the bedside and again his eyes met Miss King's. It was embarrassing to encounter that unshrinking stare.

"Don't worry yourself Miss King. You've had a slight stroke. I'm sure your speech will come back to you in a minute."

He felt certain then that he saw in those dark eyes a desperate effort to speak. He could not be mistaken. The mind was shaken by desire, but the paralysed body was incapable of obedience. For her disappointment expressed itself quite plainly, tears came to her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Ashenden took out his handkerchief and dried them.

"Don't distress yourself, Miss King. Have a little patience and I'm sure you'll be able to say anything you want."

He did not know if it was his fancy that he read in her eyes now the despairing thought that she had not the time to wait. Perhaps it was only that he ascribed to her the notions that came to himself. On the dressing-table were the governess's poor little toilet things, silver-backed embossed brushes and a silver mirror; in a corner stood a shabby black trunk and on the top of the wardrobe a large hat-box in shiny leather. It all looked poor and mean in that trim hotel room, with its suite in highly-varnished rose-wood. The glare was intolerable.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable if I turned out some of the lights?" asked Ashenden.

He put out all the lamps but the one by the bedside and then sat down again. He had a longing to smoke. Once more his eyes were held by those other eyes in which was all that remained alive of that old, old woman. He felt certain that she had something that she wanted urgently to say to him. But what was it? What was it? Perhaps she had asked him only because, feeling death near, she had had a sudden yearning, she the exile of so many years, to die with someone of her own people, so long forgotten, by her side. That was what the doctor thought. But why should she have sent for him? There were other English people in the hotel. There was an old pair, a retired Indian Civilian and his wife, to whom it seemed more natural that

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she should turn. No one could be more of a stranger to her than Ashenden.

"Have you got something to say to me, Miss King?"

He tried to read an answer in her eyes. They continued to stare at him meaningly, but what the meaning was he had no notion.

"Don't be afraid I shall go. I will stay as long as you want me."

Nothing, nothing. The black eyes, and as he looked at them they seemed to glow mysteriously as though there were fire behind them, the eyes continued to hold him with that insistent stare. Then Ashenden asked himself if she had sent for him because she knew that he was a British agent. Was it possible that at that last moment she had had some unexpected revulsion of feeling from everything that had signified to her for so many years? Perhaps at the moment of death a love for her country, a love that had been dead for half a century, awakened again in her—"I'm silly to fancy these idiotic things," thought Ashenden, "it's cheap and tawdry fiction"—and she had been seized with a desire to do something for what was after all her own. No one was quite himself just then and patriotism (in peacetime an attitude best left to politicians, publicists and fools, but in the dark days of war an emotion that can wring the heart-strings), patriotism made one do odd things. It was curious that she had been unwilling to see the Prince and his daughters. Did she on a sudden hate them? Did she feel herself a traitor on their account and now at the last hour wish to make amends? ("It's all very improbable, she's just a silly old maid who ought to have died years ago.") But you couldn't ignore the improbable. Ashenden, his common sense protesting, became strangely convinced that she had some secret that she wished to impart to him. She had sent for him knowing who he was because he could make use of it. She was dying and feared nothing. But was it really important? Ashenden leaned forward trying more eagerly to read what her eyes had to say. Perhaps it was only some trivial thing that was important only in her addled old brain. Ashenden was sick of the people who saw spies in every inoffensive passer-by and plots in the most innocent combination of circumstances. It was a hundred to one that if Miss King recovered her speech she would tell him something that could be of no use to anybody.



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But what must that old woman know! With her sharp eyes and sharp ears she must have had the chance to discover matters that were closely hidden from persons that seemed less insignificant. Ashenden thought again how he had had the impression that something of real consequence was being prepared round about him. It was curious that Holzminden should have come to the hotel that day; and why had Prince Ali and the Pasha, those wild gamblers, wasted an evening in playing contract-bridge with him? It might be that some new plan was in question, it might be that the very greatest affairs were afoot, and perhaps what the old woman had to say might make all the difference in the world. It might mean defeat or victory. It might mean anything. And there she lay powerless to speak. For a long time Ashenden stared at her in silence.

"Has it got anything to do with the war, Miss King?" he said on a sudden, loudly.

Something passed through her eyes and a tremor shot across her little old face. It was a distinct movement. Something strange and horrible was happening and Ashenden held his breath. The tiny frail body was suddenly convulsed and the old woman, as though by a final desperate effort of will, raised herself up in the bed. Ashenden sprang forward to support her.

"England," she said, just that one word, in a harsh cracked voice, and fell back in his arms.

When he laid her down on the pillow, he saw that she was dead.

## IAN FLEMING

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### *Mister Big*

Mr. Big spoke.

"You may smoke, Mister Bond. In case you have any other intentions you may care to lean forward and inspect the keyhole of the drawer in this desk facing your chair. I shall be ready for you in a moment."

Bond leant forward. It was a large keyhole. In fact, Bond estimated, .45 centimetres in diameter. Fired, Bond supposed, by a foot-switch under the desk. What a bunch of tricks this man was. Puerile. Puerile? Perhaps, after all, not to be dismissed so easily. The tricks—the bomb, the disappearing table—had worked neatly, efficiently. They had not been just empty conceits, designed to impress. Again, there was nothing absurd about this gun. Rather painstaking, perhaps, but, he had to admit, technically sound.

He lit a cigarette and gratefully drew the smoke deep into his lungs. He did not feel particularly worried by his position. He refused to believe he would come to any harm. It would be a clumsy affair to have him disappear a couple of days after he arrived from England unless a very expert accident could be contrived. And Leiter would have to be disposed of at the same time. That would be altogether too much for their two Services and Mr. Big must know it. But he was worried about Leiter in the hands of those clumsy black apes.

The Big Man's lips rolled slowly back from his teeth.

"I have not seen a member of the Secret Service for many years, Mister Bond. Not since the war. Your Service did well in the war. You have some able men. I learn from my friends that you are high up in your Service. You have a double-o number, I believe—007, if I remember right. The significance of that double-o number,

## MISTER BIG

they tell me, is that you have had to kill a man in the course of some assignment. There cannot be many double-o numbers in a Service which does not use assassination as a weapon. Whom have you been sent over to kill here, Mr. Bond? Not me by any chance?"

The voice was soft and even, without expression. There was a slight mixture of accents, American and French, but the English was almost pedantically accurate, without a trace of slang.

Bond remained silent. He assumed that Moscow had signalled his description.

"It is necessary for you to reply, Mister Bond. The fate of both of you depends upon your doing so. I have confidence in the sources of my information. I know much more than I have said. I shall easily detect a lie."

Bond believed him. He chose a story he could support and which would cover the facts.

"There are English gold coins circulating in America. Edward IV Rose Nobles," he said. "Some have been sold in Harlem. The American Treasury asked for assistance in tracing them since they must come from a British source. I came up to Harlem to see for myself, with a representative of the American Treasury, who I hope is now safely on his way back to his hotel."

"Mr. Leiter is a representative of the Central Intelligence Agency, not of the Treasury," said Mr. Big without emotion. "His position at this moment is extremely precarious."

He paused and seemed to reflect. He looked past Bond.

"Tee-Hee."

"Yassuh, Boss."

"Tie Mister Bond to his chair."

Bond half rose to his feet.

"Don't move, Mister Bond," said the voice softly. "You have a bare chance of survival if you stay where you are."

Bond looked at The Big Man, at the golden, impassive eyes.

He lowered himself back into his chair. Immediately a broad strap was passed round his body and buckled tight. Two short straps went round his wrists and tied them to the leather and metal arms. Two more went round his ankles. He could hurl himself and the chair to the floor, but otherwise he was powerless.

## IAN FLEMING

Mr. Big pressed down a switch on the intercom.

"Send in Miss Solitaire," he said and centred the switch again.

There was a moment's pause and then a section of the bookcase to the right of the desk swung open.

One of the most beautiful women Bond had ever seen came slowly in and closed the door behind her. She stood just inside the room and stood looking at Bond, taking him in slowly inch by inch, from his head to his feet. When she had completed her detailed inspection, she turned to Mr. Big.

"Yes?" she inquired flatly.

Mr. Big had not moved his head. He addressed Bond.

"This is an extraordinary woman, Mister Bond," he said in the same quiet soft voice, "and I am going to marry her because she is unique. I found her in a cabaret, in Haiti, where she was born. She was doing a telepathic act which I could not understand. I looked into it and I still could not understand. There was nothing to understand. It was telepathy."

Mr. Big paused.

"I tell you this to warn you. She is my inquisitor. Torture is messy and inconclusive. People tell you what will ease the pain. With this girl it is not necessary to use clumsy methods. She can divine the truth in people. That is why she is to be my wife. She is too valuable to remain at liberty. And," he continued blandly, "it will be interesting to see our children."

Mr. Big turned towards her and gazed at her impassively.

"For the time being she is difficult. She will have nothing to do with men. That is why, in Haiti, she was called 'Solitaire'."

"Draw up a chair," he said quietly to her. "Tell me if this man lies. Keep clear of the gun," he added.

The girl said nothing but took a chair similar to Bond's from beside the wall and pushed it towards him. She sat down almost touching his right knee. She looked into his eyes.

Her face was pale, with the pallor of white families that have lived long in the tropics. But it contained no trace of the usual exhaustion which the tropics impart to the skin and hair. The eyes were blue, alight and disdainful, but, as they gazed into his with a touch of humour, he realized they contained some message for him

## MISTER BIG

personally. It quickly vanished as his own eyes answered. Her hair was blue-black and fell heavily to her shoulders. She had high cheekbones and a wide, sensual mouth which held a hint of cruelty. Her jawline was delicate and finely cut. It showed decision and an iron will which were repeated in the straight, pointed nose. Part of the beauty of the face lay in its lack of compromise. It was a face born to command. The face of the daughter of a French Colonial slave-owner.

She wore a long evening dress of heavy white matt silk whose classical line was broken by the deep folds which fell from her shoulders and revealed the upper half of her breasts. She wore diamond earrings, square-cut in broken bands, and a thin diamond bracelet on her left wrist. She wore no rings. Her nails were short and without enamel.

She watched his eyes on her and nonchalantly drew her forearms together in her lap so that the valley between her breasts deepened.

The message was unmistakable and an answering warmth must have showed on Bond's cold, drawn face, for suddenly The Big Man picked up the small ivory whip from the desk beside him and lashed across at her, the thong whistling through the air and landing with a cruel bite across her shoulders.

Bond winced even more than she did. Her eyes blazed for an instant and then went opaque.

"Sit up," said The Big Man softly, "you forget yourself."

She sat slowly more upright. She had a pack of cards in her hands and she started to shuffle them. Then, out of bravado perhaps, she sent him yet another message—of complicity and of more than complicity.

Between her hands she faced the knave of hearts. Then the queen of spades. She held the two halves of the pack in her lap so that the two court cards looked at each other. She brought the two halves of the pack together until they kissed. Then she riffled the cards and shuffled them again.

At no moment of this dumb show did she look at Bond and it was all over in an instant. But Bond felt a glow of excitement and a quickening of the pulse. He had a friend in the enemy's camp.

"Are you ready, Solitaire?" asked The Big Man.

"Yes, the cards are ready," said the girl, in a low, cool voice.

## IAN FLEMING

"Mister Bond, look into the eyes of this girl and repeat the reason for your presence here which you gave me just now."

Bond looked into her eyes. There was no message. They were not focused on his. They looked through him.

He repeated what he had said.

For a moment he felt an uncanny thrill. Could this girl tell? If she could tell, would she speak for him or against him?

For a moment there was dead silence in the room. Bond tried to look indifferent. He gazed up at the ceiling—then back at her.

Her eyes came back into focus. She turned away from him and looked at Mr. Big.

"He speaks the truth," she said coldly.

Mr. Big reflected for a moment. He seemed to decide. He pressed a switch on the intercom.

"Blabbermouth?"

"Yassuh, Boss."

"You're holding that American, Leiter."

"Yassuh."

"Hurt him considerably. Ride him down to Bellevue Hospital and dump him nearby. Got that?"

"Yassuh."

"Don't be seen."

"Nossuh."

Mr. Big centred the switch.

"God damn your bloody eyes," said Bond viciously. "The CIA won't let you get away with this!"

"You forget, Mister Bond. They have no jurisdiction in America. The American Secret Service has no power in America—only abroad. And the FBI are no friends of theirs. Tee-Hee, come here."

"Yassuh, Boss." Tee-Hee came and stood beside the desk.

Mr. Big looked across at Bond.

"Which finger do you use least, Mister Bond?"

Bond was startled by the question. His mind raced.

"On reflection, I expect you will say the little finger of the left hand," continued the soft voice. "Tee-Hee, break the little finger of Mr. Bond's left hand."

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The negro showed the reason for his nickname.

"Hee-hee," he gave a falsetto giggle. "Hee-hee."

He walked jauntily over to Bond. Bond clutched madly at the arms of his chair. Sweat started to break out on his forehead. He tried to imagine the pain so that he could control it.

The negro slowly unhinged the little finger of Bond's left hand, immovably bound to the arm of his chair.

He held the tip between finger and thumb and very deliberately started to bend it back, giggling inanely to himself.

Bond rolled and heaved, trying to upset the chair, but Tee-Hee put his other hand on the chair-back and held it there. The sweat poured off Bond's face. His teeth started to bare in an involuntary rictus. Through the increasing pain he could just see the girl's eyes wide upon him, her red lips slightly parted.

The finger stood upright, away from the hand. Started to bend slowly backwards towards his wrist. Suddenly it gave. There was a sharp crack.

"That will do," said Mr. Big.

Tee-Hee released the mangled finger with reluctance.

Bond uttered a soft animal groan and fainted.

"Da guy ain't go no sensayuma," commented Tee-Hee.

Solitaire sat limply back in her chair and closed her eyes.

"Did he have a gun?" asked Mr. Big.

"Yassuh." Tee-Hee took Bond's Beretta out of his pocket and slipped it across the desk. The Big Man picked it up and looked at it expertly. He weighed it in his hand, testing the feel of the skeleton grip. Then he pumped the shells out on to the desk, verified that he had also emptied the chamber and slid it over towards Bond.

"Wake him up," he said, looking at his watch. It said three o'clock.

Tee-Hee went behind Bond's chair and dug his nails into the lobes of Bond's ears.

Bond groaned and lifted his head.

His eyes focused on Mr. Big and he uttered a string of obscenities.

"Be thankful you're not dead," said Mr. Big without emotion.

"Any pain is preferable to death. Here is your gun. I have the shells. Tee-Hee, give it back to him."

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Tee-Hee took it off the desk and slipped it back into Bond's holster.

"I will explain to you briefly," continued The Big Man, "why it is that you are not dead; why you have been permitted to enjoy the sensation of pain instead of adding to the pollution of the Harlem River from the folds of what is jocularly known as a cement overcoat."

He paused for a moment and then spoke.

"Mister Bond, I suffer from boredom. I am a prey to what the early Christians called 'accidie', the deadly lethargy that envelops those who are sated, those who have no more desires. I am absolutely pre-eminent in my chosen profession, trusted by those who occasionally employ my talents, feared and instantly obeyed by those whom I myself employ. I have, literally, no more worlds to conquer within my chosen orbit. Alas, it is too late in my life to change that orbit for another one, and since power is the goal of all ambition, it is unlikely that I could possibly acquire more power in another sphere than I already possess in this one."

Bond listened with part of his mind. With the other half he was already planning. He sensed the presence of Solitaire, but he kept his eyes off her. He gazed steadily across the table at the great grey face with its unwinking golden eyes.

The soft voice continued.

"Mister Bond, I take pleasure now only in artistry, in the polish and finesse which I can bring to my operations. It has become almost a mania with me to impart an absolute rightness, a high elegance, to the execution of my affairs. Each day, Mister Bond, I try to set myself still higher standards of subtlety and technical polish so that each of my proceedings may be a work of art, bearing my signature as clearly as the creations of, let us say, Benvenuto Cellini. I am content, for the time being, to be my only judge, but I sincerely believe, Mister Bond, that the approach to perfection which I am steadily achieving in my operations will ultimately win recognition in the history of our times."

Mr. Big paused. Bond saw that his great yellow eyes were wide, as if he saw visions. He's a raving megalomaniac, thought Bond. And all the more dangerous because of it. The fault in most criminal



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minds was that greed was their only impulse. A dedicated mind was quite another matter. This man was no gangster. He was a menace. Bond was fascinated and slightly awestruck.

"I accept anonymity for two reasons," continued the low voice. "Because the nature of my operations demands it and because I admire the self-negation of the anonymous artist. If you will allow the conceit, I see myself sometimes as one of those great Egyptian fresco painters who devoted their lives to producing masterpieces in the tombs of kings, knowing that no living eye would ever see them."

The great eyes closed for a moment.

"However, let us return to the particular. The reason, Mister Bond, why I have not killed you this morning is because it would give me no aesthetic pleasure to blow a hole in your stomach. With this engine," he gestured towards the gun trained on Bond through the desk drawer, "I have already blown many holes in many stomachs, so I am quite satisfied that my little mechanical toy is a sound technical achievement. Moreover, as no doubt you rightly surmise, it would be a nuisance for me to have a lot of busybodies around here asking questions about the disappearance of yourself and your friend Mr. Leiter. Not more than a nuisance; but for various reasons I wish to concentrate on other matters at the present time.

"So," Mr. Big looked at his watch, "I decided to leave my card upon each of you and to give you one more solemn warning. You must leave the country to-day, and Mr. Leiter must transfer to another assignment. I have quite enough to bother me without having a lot of agents from Europe added to the considerable strength of local busybodies with which I have to contend.

"That is all," he concluded. "If I see you again, you will die in a manner as ingenious and appropriate as I can devise on that day.

"Tee-Hee, take Mister Bond to the garage. Tell two of the men to take him to Central Park and throw him in the ornamental water. He may be damaged but not killed if he resists. Understood?"

"Yassuh, Boss," said Tee-Hee, giggling in a high falsetto.

He undid Bond's ankles, then his wrists. He took Bond's injured hand and twisted it right up his back. Then with his other hand he undid the strap round his waist. He yanked Bond to his feet.

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"Giddap," said Tee-Hee.

Bond gazed once more into the great grey face.

"Those who deserve to die," he paused, "die the death they deserve. Write that down," he added. "It's an original thought."

Then he glanced at Solitaire. Her eyes were bent on the hands in her lap. She didn't look up.

"Git goin'," said Tee-Hee. He turned Bond round towards the wall and pushed him forward, twisting Bond's wrist up his back until his forearm was almost dislocated. Bond uttered a realistic groan and his footsteps faltered. He wanted Tee-Hee to believe that he was cowed and docile. He wanted the torturing grip to ease just a little on his left arm. As it was, any sudden movement would only result in his arm being broken.

Tee-Hee reached over Bond's shoulder and pressed on one of the books in the serried shelves. A large section opened on a central pivot. Bond was pushed through and the negro kicked the heavy section back into place. It closed with a double click. From the thickness of the door, Bond guessed it would be sound-proof. They were faced by a short carpeted passage ending in some stairs that led downwards. Bond groaned.

"You're breaking my arm," he said. "Look out. I'm going to faint."

He stumbled again, trying to measure exactly the negro's position behind him. He remembered Leiter's injunction: "Shins, groin, stomach, throat. Hit 'em anywhere else and you'll just break your hand."

"Shut yo mouf," said the negro, but he pulled Bond's hand an inch or two down his back.

This was all Bond needed.

They were half way down the passage with only a few feet more to the top of the stairs. Bond faltered again, so that the negro's body bumped into his. This gave him all the range and direction he needed.

He bent a little and his right hand, straight and flat as a board, whipped round and inwards. He felt it thud hard into the target. The negro screamed shrilly like a wounded rabbit. Bond felt his left arm come free. He whirled round, pulling out his empty gun with

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his right hand. The negro was bent double, his hands between his legs, uttering little panting screams. Bond whipped the gun down hard on the back of the woolly skull. It gave back a dull klonk as if he had hammered on a door, but the negro groaned and fell forward on his knees, throwing out his hands for support. Bond got behind him and with all the force he could put behind the steel-capped shoe, he gave one mighty kick below the lavender-coloured seat of the negro's pants.

A final short scream was driven out of the man as he sailed the few feet to the stairs. His head hit the side of the iron banisters and then, a twisting wheel of arms and legs, he disappeared over the edge, down into the well. There was a short crash as he caromed off some obstacle, then a pause, then a mingled thud and crack as he hit the ground. Then silence.

Bond wiped the sweat out of his eyes and stood listening. He thrust his wounded left hand into his coat. It was throbbing with pain and swollen to almost twice its normal size. Holding his gun in his right hand, he walked to the head of the stairs and slowly down, moving softly on the balls of his feet.

There was only one floor between him and the spreadeagled body below. When he reached the landing, he stopped again and listened. Quite close, he could hear the high-pitched whine of some form of fast wireless transmitter. He verified that it came from behind one of the two doors on the landing. This must be Mr. Big's communications centre. He longed to carry out a quick raid. But his gun was empty and he had no idea how many men he would find in the room. It could only have been the earphones on their ears that had prevented the operators from hearing the sounds of Tee-Hee's fall. He crept on down.

Tee-Hee was either dead or dying. He lay spread-eagled on his back. His striped tie lay across his face like a squashed adder. Bond felt no remorse. He frisked the body for a gun and found one stuck in the waistband of the lavender trousers, now stained with blood. It was a Colt .38 Detective Special with a sawn barrel. All chambers were loaded. Bond slipped the useless Beretta back in its holster. He nestled the big gun into his palm and smiled grimly.

A small door faced him, bolted on the inside. Bond put his ear to it. The muffled sound of an engine reached him. This must be

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the garage. But the running engine? At that time of the morning? Bond ground his teeth. Of course. Mr. Big would have spoken on the intercom and warned them that Tee-Hee was bringing him down. They must be wondering what was holding him. They were probably watching the door for the negro to emerge.

Bond thought for a moment. He had the advantage of surprise. If only the bolts were well-oiled.

His left hand was almost useless. With the Colt in his right, he tested the first bolt with the edge of his damaged hand. It slipped easily back. So did the second. There remained only a press-down handle. He eased it down and pulled the door softly towards him.

It was a thick door and the noise of the engine got louder as the crack widened. The car must be just outside. Any further movement of the door would betray him. He whipped it open and stood facing sideways like a fencer so as to offer as small a target as possible. The hammer lay back on his gun.

A few feet away stood a black sedan, its engine running. It faced the open double doors of the garage. Bright arc-lights lit up the shining bodywork of several other cars. There was a big negro at the wheel of the sedan and another stood near him, leaning against the rear door. No one else was in view.

At sight of Bond the negroes' mouths fell open in astonishment. A cigarette dropped from the mouth of the man at the wheel. Then they both dived for their guns.

Instinctively, Bond shot first at the man standing, knowing he would be quickest on the draw.

The heavy gun roared hollowly in the garage.

The negro clutched his stomach with both hands, staggered two steps towards Bond, and collapsed on his face, his gun clattering on to the concrete.

The man at the wheel screamed as Bond's gun swung on to him. Hampered by the wheel the negro's shooting hand was still inside his coat.

Bond shot straight into the screaming mouth and the man's head crashed against the side window.

Bond ran round the car and opened the door. The negro sprawled horribly out. Bond threw his revolver on to the driving-seat and

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yanked the body out on to the ground. He tried to avoid the blood. He got into the seat and blessed the running engine and the steering-wheel gear-lever. He slammed the door, rested his injured hand on the left of the wheel and crashed the lever forward.

The hand-brake was still on. He had to lean under the wheel to release it with his right hand.

It was a dangerous pause. As the heavy car surged forward out of the wide doors there was the boom of a gun and a bullet hammered into the bodywork. He tore the wheel round right-handed and there was another shot that missed high. Across the street a window splintered.

The flash came from low down near the floor and Bond guessed that the first negro had somehow managed to reach his gun.

There were no other shots and no sound came from the blank faces of the buildings behind him. As he went through the gears he could see nothing in the driving-mirror except the broad bar of light from the garage shining out across the dark empty street.

Bond had no idea where he was or where he was heading. It was a wide featureless street and he kept going. He found himself driving on the left-hand side and quickly swerved over to the right. His hand hurt terribly but the thumb and forefinger helped to steady the wheel. He tried to remember to keep his left side away from the blood on the door and window. The endless street was populated only by the little ghosts of steam that wavered up out of the gratings in the asphalt that gave access to the piped heat system of the city. The ugly bonnet of the car mowed them down one by one, but in the driving-mirror Bond could see them rising again behind him in a diminishing vista of mildly gesticulating white wraiths.

He kept the big car at fifty. He came to some red traffic lights and jumped them. Several more dark blocks and then there was a lighted avenue. There was traffic and he paused until the lights went green. He turned left and was rewarded by a succession of green lights, each one sweeping him on and further away from the enemy. He checked at an intersection and read the signs. He was on Park Avenue and 116th Street. He slowed again at the next street. It was 115th. He was heading downtown, away from Harlem, back into the City. He kept going. He turned off at 60th Street. It was deserted. He switched

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off the engine and left the car opposite a fire hydrant. He took the gun off the seat, shoved it down the waistband of his trousers and walked back to Park Avenue.

A few minutes later he flagged a prowling cab and then suddenly he was walking up the steps of the St. Regis.

"Message for you, Mr. Bond," said the night porter. Bond kept his left side away from him. He opened the message with his right hand. It was from Felix Leiter, timed at four a.m. "Call me at once," it said.

Bond walked to the elevator and was carried up to his floor. He let himself into 2100 and went through into the sitting-room.

So both of them were alive. Bond fell into a chair beside the telephone.

"God Almighty," said Bond with deep gratitude. "What a break."

## JOHN P. MARQUAND

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### *High Tide*

Sometimes, in the sultry warmth of summer at Deer Bottom, Scott Mattaye could remember the high tide; and sometimes, when he was feeling in the mood, he might even tell of how he went through a hostile country to find an army which was lost, and how the Battle of Gettysburg might have been wholly different if his horse had not gone lame. At such an hour, after his second glass, the old man would sit straighter at the table, and his voice, slightly cracked, but soft and gently drawling, would rise above the whirring of the moths which kept fluttering around the guttering candles like incarnations of the quiet sounds from the warm, dark night outside.

"You follow me, gentlemen?" he would say. "I'm referrin', of co'se, to the lack of cavalry in the opening phases of that engagement—cavalry, the eyes and ears. And I'm referring, above all, to the temp'rary absence—an' I maintain the just and unavoidable absence—of our cavalry general, on whose staff I had the honour of servin'. I'm referrin' to that immortal hero, gentlemen, Major-General J. E. B. Stuart—Beauty Stuart—in the Army of Northern Virginia of the Confederate States of America—the ve'y greatest cavalry commander in that army, gentlemen, which, of co'se, is the same as sayin' the greatest cavalry leader in the history of the world."

He meant no exaggeration when he said it. Some impression had been left upon him which transcended time. He would smile beneath his drooping white moustache as though he had a secret, and he had the secret of his days: Strange, unrelated moments were flitting before him like the shadows of the moths upon the wall—plumed hats, boots of yellow leather that came above the knee, girls snipping buttons off grey coats, eggnogs, Virginia hams, black boys dancing the buck and

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wing beneath the lantern light, a kiss, a lock of hair, the Bower, Frederick, Winchester, high tide.

"High tide," he said: "it was all accident and time."

It was clear what he was thinking, although his words had a way of wandering when his mind was groping in the mazes of his vanished world. He was going back to the hours when the tide of the Confederacy lapped over the Potomac to reach its high-water mark of the war. He was thinking of Rowser's Ford and the captured wagon train at Cooksville—twisted iron rails, staggering horses, men reeling in the saddle, drunk with sleep. He was thinking of a spy, and of Stuart's last great raid. The Army of Northern Virginia was pouring into Pennsylvania. Lee and Longstreet were arguing over plans.

"Sammy," he said to the cook's small boy, "bring refreshment to the gentleman. . . . Now, Gettysburg—of co'se, we should have whipped 'em if Stuart had been there. I should have fetched him—yes, indeed. If that horse had not gone lame near East Berlin, why, sholy I'd have fetched him. If I had not stopped by the stone house near the road. A matter of a spy, you understand—a foul, ugly matter. . . . I share in the responsibility, gentlemen. It all was accident and time."

He did not add that he had nearly died in cold blood in that square stone house.

He could see the beginning, and he knew that the hand of fate was in it, though it happened more than sixty years ago. Stuart had been stroking his fine brown beard; as he did when he was troubled. It was in the cool of an early summer morning, the first day of July. The horses' heads were drooping, and faces were blank from lack of sleep.

"Mattaye," Stuart was saying, "I'm lost. Early's gone. Everybody's gone. I've sent off three officers already. You go out, too, and find the army. You see this map? We're here. Ride out towards that place Gettysburg yonder. Keep riding till you find it."

It was a fine day, he could remember. The fields were green and fresh from early summer, and the land was richer than the land at home. It was a country of fine, rolling fields of pasture and wheat and corn, of neat hedges, neat houses and compact, ungenerous trees. It was a land uncompromising in its plenty, without warmth of welcome. But the dead weight of weariness was what he remembered



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best. After two days of steady march, men were lying exhausted with bridles in hands, watching horses that stood too tired to eat. There was food in the Yankee wagons they had taken. He could see the white tops of the wagons down the road, but there were many too tired for food.

Scott Mattaye was made of iron and rawhide then, but he was very tired.

"The army, sir?" he said. "Which army, sir?"

His question made Stuart laugh, and the sound of it came back across the years. He was in a hostile country with his column too tired to move. He was lost and he was worried, and he had not slept an hour in the last three days. Yet the general seemed to feel none of the lethargy of exhaustion. The way he wore his sash, the tilt of the plume in his hat, the angle of his cloak about one shoulder made his equipment look as fresh as when he had started. Nothing ever wilted in the general.

"Which army?" he said. "Well, I'm not aiming to encounter Federal troops in force this minute. I'd prefer to meet the Army of Northern Virginia, General Robert E. Lee commanding, now engaged in invasion of Pennsylvania, and due to end this war. I'm out of touch, and I don't like it—not right now. They're somewhere over there—somewhere."

He waved his arm towards the south-west, but there was no dust or smoke or sound; nothing but open rolling fields, stretching to the horizon in the tranquil light of early morning. The very peace was like a disturbing suspicion that something had gone wrong. It could only have been anxiety that made Stuart speak so frankly.

"The corps should be coming together," he said, "and we should be in front. There should be word, you understand? . . . Your horse all right?"

Scott's horse was a light sorrel caked with sweat and dust.

"He's worn down, sir," said Scott. "But he's as good as any in the column, I reckon, sir."

"Take your blankets and saddle off," Stuart said. "Kill him if you have to, but report to General Lee, you understand? Ask for orders and a new horse to take you back."

"Yes, sir," said Scott. "Where will I find you, sir?"

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"We're resting here two hours," said Stuart. "Then we're moving on to Carlisle. Watch out for cavalry, and don't get caught. We've lost too many on the staff. Good-bye."

Only the impression of small things was left to Scott Mattaye, and the touch of all the great sights meant much less, until all his memory of camp and bivouac came down to little things. Bodies of men, the sound of marching troops and firing were a part of his life, and were blurred into the monotony of days, but the smell of bacon grease in smoke, a voice or the squeal of a horse would be like yesterday. He remembered how his blankets sprawled over the tailboard of the headquarters wagon, inertly, like a dead man's limbs. As they did so, he had a glimpse of fine grey cloth among them. It was his new uniform coat, which he had planned to wear in Washington City, certain they would take Washington.

An impulse made him put it on which was composed of various thoughts—the idea that he might never wear it, through accident or theft, the desire to appear in an enemy country like a gentleman, and the conviction that a staff officer should look his best. The coat had the buff facings of the staff. Though it was wrinkled and still damp from a wetting in the Potomac, it was very well cut. He strapped his belt over it, with his sabre and his pistol—a fine, ivory-handled weapon which he had taken from a Yankee colonel in Centerville. His saddle was a Yankee saddle; even his horse had a U.S. brand, but his coat was Richmond, bought with two hundred and fifty dollars of his country's notes.

"You, Jerry," he said to the horse, "step on. We're bound to go." Then he remembered that the animal sighed almost exactly like a man.

He went down the road past the picket at a trot, and half a mile farther on he met a patrol, riding back. He knew the officer. He was Travis Greene, from Maryland, and Scott had always liked him. He liked the way he handled horses; there was something in him which Scott had always trusted—a candour, a vein of sympathy.

"Trav," he said, "seen anything out there?"

Trav shook his head and grinned. The corners of his thin mouth wrinkled.

"No," he answered. "Where yo' headin'?"

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"Message," said Scott.

"Seems like the general's getting nervous," Trav said. "Nothing but the staff with messages. Yo' won't get far on that old crock of yours. He's powerful near through."

"Why, boy," said Scott, "this animal can go a week and never drop. Why, he just craves to run. Why, boy, you've never seen a raid. This is only triffin' up to now."

"Where we headin'?" the other asked. "I reckon you don't know."

Scott felt the importance of his knowledge and smiled. "Don't you wish you knew?" he said. "Where Beauty Stuart wants. That's where. Come to think of it, seems to me you're always asking questions."

"Saucy, aren't you?" said Trav. "I reckon you're out calling in that new coat of yours. I'd take you for a damn Yank if it wasn't for that coat."

"Would you?" said Scott. "Well, you ask Beauty Stuart where I'm going. No doubt he'd just delight to tell you, and call for your advice. I'll be seeing you. Good-bye."

Then, almost without thinking, he pulled his watch from his breeches pocket. It was a fine, heavy repeater.

"You, Trav," he called, "keep this, and if I don't get back, send it on to Deer Bottom, and I'll be much obliged."

He could still hear their voices, low and pleasant, and could recall the way Trav started as he reached and caught the watch.

"To Deer Bottom? Certain sure! I'm proud of your confidence," he said. "Good-bye!"

Scott Mattaye loosened his revolver in its holster and put his horse to a trot again, not fast, for he had to save the animal's strength, and the horse was tired.

"You, Jerry," he said, "take your time."

Then, as he spoke the word, he knew that he had made a blunder. He had three hundred dollars in Confederate bills in his pocket, which would have been more useful at Deer Bottom than a watch; and now, because of a sentimental impulse, he had no way of judging the distance he was travelling, except by instinct and the sun. He knew that one could conceivably ride all day through an opposing army with a good horse and a knowledge of the road. He had seen enough in the raids around McClellan and Pope to have gained a

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contempt for Yankee horsemanship. He could get safe away from a regiment of Yankee cavalry.

But now he could detect a difference. He had been in a friendly country on other rides alone, where there had been a careless tangle of woods and grown-over fields. Friendly people had waved to him; girls had brought him milk. His horse beneath him had been like a reservoir of untapped strength, but now his horse was tired. There was no spring in the trot, nor a trace of willingness to increase the pace, and the country itself was foreign. There was a plenty in the Pennsylvania fields, like the rolling land along the Shenandoah, but there was no generosity in that plenty. There was the same sinister threat in the meticulous furrows and the abundance of that earth which he had seen in the armies that sprang from it.

There was a menace in that hostile land, for everything was watching him. He could feel a hatred in that country rising against him like a wave. The sun, glinting on the windows of small farmhouses, made those windows look like eyes, reflecting the hatred of unseen faces, staring towards the road. And the uncertainty of time was weighing on him, because he did not know the time. The uncertainty made him remember Stuart's own uncertainty. "Time," the hoofbeats of his horse were saying, and the humming of the insects and the rustling of the corn were speaking of that flowing, unseen principle which connected life and death.

A sound made him draw his reins, and his horse stopped, obedient and still. It came, a swift, metallic click, from behind a clump of small trees near a bend which shut out his vision to the right. His revolver was cocked in his hand, while he sat staring, listening. He did not know that he was speaking until he heard his voice.

"Pshaw," he heard himself mutter.

A man in overalls was hoeing a potato patch just around the bend. He turned and stared at Scott.

"Morning, friend," said Scott. "It looks like a right fine morning."

The man spat on a potato hill. "I ain't no friend of yours," he said, "nor any of your kind."

Scott laughed. "Why, mister," he said, "I mean you no harm, and that's why I say 'friend'. I only aim to ask you if you can let me know the time."

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"Would it give you comfort," the other asked, "if you was to know the time?"

"Why, sholy," Scott said, still smiling. "I'd like right well to know."

The man's voice became louder.

"Then I'll die before I tell yer, ye nigger-tradin' thief! Two of my sons has died, and I can die before I raise a hand to give one mite of comfort to your lot! I only hope your time is short, and I may see your carcass rotting! Now git on!"

Scott Mattaye put his horse to the trot and hurried down the road, amazed. He saw other men pause to gaze at him from the roadside. Women stared from doorways. Children, when they saw him, ran screaming. He did not stop again to ask the time.

He did not stop again until his horse went lame. By then a high forenoon sun was beating on his plumed felt hat, and the farming country lay before him as beautiful as a picture, incongruously far from war. The horse went lame so suddenly you might have thought he had been shot—a stumble, a sharp snort of pain, and he was limping. After Scott Mattaye was off the saddle, it did not take half a minute to convince him that his horse was through, and, though he had grown callous to the suffering of animals, he had a pang of sorrow.

The road, he remembered, was sloping down to a ford across a brook. Beyond the ford it wound up again past a rutted lane, which led to a square house of deep-grey limestone, set back perhaps a hundred yards from the roadway.

That house on its little rise of ground always came back to his memory as aloofly pleasant—heavy chimneys, small-paned windows, a fine, arched doorway of an earlier time. It always seemed to him to speak of kindness and of sober, decent lives, and to be without a taint of anything sinister or bizarre. A long cattle barn stood behind the house, flanked by young apple trees set in even rows. He looked for half a minute, then hooked the bridle through his arm, walking slowly with his limping horse.

"Jerry," he said, "I'm going to leave you yonder."

The windows were blank and impassive as he walked up the lane, and everything was silent—too silent.

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"Hello," he called. "Is anybody home?"

The sound of his voice was like the breaking of a spell. Two shepherd dogs rushed at him, snarling. A door had slammed and an old man ran towards them with a stick, a picture of towering strength, half worn away by age. A white shirt, bare, scrawny arms and a fine white beard half-way down his chest, but his height was what Scott remembered best. He was very tall.

"Grandpa!" he heard a child's voice calling from the house. "Don't take on so, grandpa! You'll have another bad turn if you do!"

The noise of the dogs seemed to ebb away. All his memory of the barnyard seemed to ebb away, leaving only that figure of age—something never to forget. The old man was breathing much too heavily. His shirt and knit suspenders and baggy trousers took nothing from his dignity. Something in his face made his beard like ashes over glowing coals—a mobile, powerful face. His forehead was high. His eyes were serene and steely blue. Scott Mattaye took off his hat and bowed, though the man was plain and not a gentleman.

"I'm intrudin', sir," he said. "My horse—he's broken down. I reckon that——"

"Mary Breen!" the old man shouted. "You, Mary Breen!"

A girl—she could not have been above thirteen—came rushing from the house. Her gingham dress, her face and eyes, had a washed-out look; her bleached yellow pigtails were slapping on her shoulders.

"Mary Breen," the old man said, "put up that hoss. . . . I made haste, as I always will, to serve the Lord. . . . Young man, you come with me. This is a day of glory."

Scott Mattaye stared at him, bewildered for a moment.

"Put up that horse," the old man said, "and put the saddle on the bay that's waiting. . . . You'll need another horse for sure. Now, please to follow me."

"Sholy, sir," said Scott. "With great pleasure. I'll be pleased to settle for another animal, of co'se. Excuse me. Could you let me know the time?"

He had no premonition on entering the house. He had seen enough peculiar people and places in that war. The tide of war had pushed him into mean kitchens and stables for a night, or just as strangely it

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had whirled him into dining-rooms of plantation houses, where he had touched on lives which he would never touch again. He did not bother to put an implication on the old man's words, except that they were friendly. The friendliness brought back Scott's confidence in inevitable fortune, and he straightened his sash and dusted off his coat.

"Yes," the old man said again, "this is a day of glory. I'm glad I've lived to see it, because I'm gettin' old."

The kitchen was very neat. A kettle was humming on the stove, so that the steam made the air humidly pleasant. There were two strong wooden chairs and a deal table, but what he noticed first was the asthmatic, hurried ticking of a clock above the humming of the boiling water. He turned to glance at it where it stood on a shelf between two windows. A dingy clock in a veneered mahogany case—he could shut his eyes and see it still. The hour was just eleven.

"No," the old man said, "not here. The parlour's just this way."

He had opened a door to the front entry, and Scott began to smile, amused by the formality which led him to the parlour. He had a glimpse of himself in the entry mirror; his face was thin and brown, and his coat, he was pleased to notice, fitted very well.

"Here you be," the old man said, "and we give thanks you're here."

He opened the parlour door as he spoke, and Scott had a whiff of fresh cigar smoke and a blurred vision of a horsehair sofa and of faded floral wallpaper, but he only half saw the room. For a second—the time could not have been long—he stood on the threshold stonily.

A sabre and a revolver were lying on the parlour table, and behind the table, smoking a cigar, his coat half unbuttoned and his black hat slouched over his eyes, a Federal major was sitting. In that instant of surprise Scott could think of nothing. A sharp nose and deep-brown eyes, florid cheeks, a drooping black moustache half covering a lantern jaw, clean linen, dark blue broadcloth, gold on the shoulders—Scott Mattaye saw it all in an instant, and then, before speech or motion could touch him, the major began to smile.

"Howdy, Captain James," the major said. "I saw you from the window. I'm from—you know where. Let's get down to business. I've got a way to ride. Do you want to see my papers?"

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"No," said Scott; his voice was hoarse. "No, Major."

"No doubt about you," the major said. "New coat, Yankee saddle, Yankee boots. You've got your nerve to go among 'em so, and, by gad, you're young to be in a game like this."

The major was watching him curiously, but not suspiciously, beneath the brim of his black hat, and Scott Mattaye had learned to read the capabilities of an individual. Something told him that this officer was an accurate and dangerous man. The major's hand, with thick, blunt fingers, was resting on the table just six inches away from his pistol butt. Scott could see it from the corner of his eye, and he could notice four notches cut in the black walnut of the butt, telling him in silent voices that the chances were the major would shoot him dead if he made a sudden move. Scott was standing in the doorway, with the old man just behind him. If he should make a move to draw his weapon, before his pistol was out of the holster he knew he would be dead.

"A dirty game," the major said with his cigar between his teeth, "a thankless game. You should be more careful, Captain. Your uniform's too new."

• Scott Mattaye was not a fool. He knew, if he had not known before, what he was supposed to be and why the major was waiting.

"Thank you, sir," said Scott, and he contrived to smile. A little talk, a word, a gesture, and he might have a chance to snatch that pistol from the table. "I agree, sir, it's a right dirty business, and I detest a—scout. . . . But, excuse me, we'd better be alone."

It would help to get the old man out. He turned slowly, until their eyes met—the old man's eyes were as blue as a china plate at home—and he heard the major laughing.

"Don't worry about Pa Breen," he said. "He's as straight as string. . . . Father, you go out and close the door."

"Young man," old Mr. Breen said, "don't fret about me none. I can die for a cause as good as you, I guess. Amen."

When he closed the door, there was no sound outside in the entry, but the farmer must have had the tread of an Indian, because, five seconds later, Scott heard the kitchen door slam shut.

"The old man's cracked," the major said. "You know, one of those fanatic abolitionists—agent in the underground, friend of Garrison



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and Whittier, leader of the party hereabouts. Why, he'd kill a man in grey as easily as he'd stick a pig, and he's in the butcher business. They had to hide his pants so he wouldn't go to Harpers Ferry with Brown."

"Yes, sir," said Scott. "It's been my observation that he's a right smart old man."

The major tapped his fingers on the table, but some perversity kept them close to the revolver butt.

"Mad," said the major. "Ideas drive men mad, when ideas and religion mix. . . . What's your notion of their strength, James? . . . Sit down. There's a chair."

Scott Mattaye drew his chair carefully to the opposite side of the table. Being an officer of the staff, he had heard enough rumours and secrets to enable him to twist them plausibly into lies. It surprised him how quickly his mind was working, and as smoothly as his voice.

"Major," said Scott, "Marse Bob, he has a heap of men. Reserves have been drawn from the state garrisons. I'm safe saying General Lee's across the river with a hundred and ten thousand. It's high tide."

He tossed out the number glibly, though he knew he was naming twice the strength. He did so from his knowledge of the Yankee obsession of superior numbers, and he saw that his guess was right. The major whistled softly.

"You're high," he said, "I hope. Can you name the strength of corps?"

He had never thought of the meaning of information until he sat there, waiting for the Yankee major to move his hand. As he spoke, he could think of armies moving like blind monsters, each groping towards the other to the tune of lies like this. He paused and leaned a trifle across the table.

"Major," he said, "have you another of those cigars? I'm perishin' for a smoke."

He gathered his feet under him noiselessly. He could not sit there talking. If he could make the major move his hand, he could push the table over.

"Beg pardon," the major said, and reached with his left hand inside his coat and tossed a leather case across the table. "A light?" The

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major pushed across a silver match safe, still with his left hand. "Believe me, your information's worth a box of those cigars."

A tap on the door made him stop. It was the little girl with the bleached pigtails; she was carrying two glasses and a small stone jug.

"Why," said Scott Mattaye, "hello, honeybee!"

"Grandpop," said the little girl, "he said to fetch you this."

"Set it on the floor," the major said, "and close the door behind you. We're not thirsty, sister."

"Grandpop," said the little girl, "he don't touch it since he was took with spells. Somethin' 'pears to git ahold of him, like a rope acrost the chest. First a pain under his arm, like, and then acrost the chest."

"You tell your grandpop to take a pill," the major said, "and go out and close the door."

The major leaned back in his chair. His deliberation set Scott's nerves on edge, but the major did not move his hand.

"Well," he said. "It's a quaint, strange world. Here you and I are sitting, smoking good Havanas. There an old man is 'took with spells'. And somewhere else two armies are jockeying for position. Suppose they ran into each other blind, neither of them ready. War's like walking in the dark."

"Believe me, sir," Scott said, and he half forgot what he was supposed to be, "Robert E. Lee is never in the dark. He's the greatest man alive."

"You've got the cant," said the major. "But you don't believe that, do you? Where's his cavalry? Off with Stuart, when it should be in front of his army. Either Lee or Stuart's a plain fool."

Scott Mattaye half rose from his chair, and sat down again. Just in time he remembered where he was.

"Yes, sir," the major was saying, as though he were reading from a textbook. "Cavalry should form a screen in front of any army of invasion, as any plebe knows at the Point, instead of being detached on a needless mission, moving north-west when the main body's thirty miles south."

Then Scott Mattaye forgot, and spoke before he thought. "Here," he asked sharply. "How did you know that?"

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The major's head went forward; his eyes were suddenly sharp: "Why, you sent us word from Hanover yourself."

"Hanover?" said Scott, but the major was not listening. At last he had raised his right hand from the table.

"Hush!" the major said. "Hush! Listen!"

For a second Scott forgot the hand. The major had good ears. Through the closed windows Scott became conscious of what the major heard, though it was not a sound exactly. It was rather a very faint concussion, a stirring in the air, which might have been summer thunder if the sun were not shining. Even in the parlour Scott could feel its strength.

"I hear 'em. Guns," he said.

Though the major was looking at him, his eyes were blank from listening.

"Yes," he said, "a scad of guns. We've struck into something heavy. . . . There. You hear?"

Scott could hear, and he could see. In that same instant the officer turned his head towards the direction of the sound, and then Scott moved. He was very quick in those days, when a sudden motion might make the difference between life and death. That Yankee moved also, but he was not fast enough. Scott had snatched the pistol up, and he was stepping backward.

"Here, you!" the Major shouted. "Set that down!"

"Mister major," Scott told him, "yo' step backward from that table and keep down yo' voice, if yo' want to save yo' skin. . . . That's better, Major. . . . You've told me somethin' right valuable. General Stuart will be pleased to know he's got a spy out with him. I'll be surprised if that spy keeps livin' long."

The major was a cool man. He leaned against the wall, twisting an end of his moustache and speaking in a careful nasal drawl.

"All right for now," the major said, "but you listen to me, staff officer. A spy's more valuable than you or me. I hope you realize I'll do my best to stop you if I can."

Scott smiled back at him. "I realize," he said. "That's why I beg of you to stand right still. If there's a battle yonder, I'm goin' to it, mister major, and yo' horse is goin' with me."

"You've got a most consoling voice," the major said.

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"Put your hands above your head," said Scott.

Then he knew that there was something wrong. The major's eyes had narrowed and he was looking across Scott's shoulder towards the little parlour door.

"Certainly," the major said. "Don't get excited, Johnny."

There was a creak of a floorboard behind him. He remembered the impulse to turn and the certainty that something was just behind him, but almost with the impulse a weight landed on his back and he was pitching forward.

Scott fired just as he was falling, so that the crash of the shot and the smell of black powder blended with a taste of sulphur in his mouth. Someone had him by the throat. He kicked to free himself, but someone held his legs.

"Tie his hands," he heard the major say. "Steady. He's all right."

He was choking; flashes of searing light were darting across his eyes.

"Breen"—another voice was speaking—a soft Southern voice—"take yo' hands off him. We've got him all right now."

Then he was struggling to his feet. His hands were tied behind him, and he noticed that a cloud of powder smoke was rising softly towards the ceiling. There was a haze before his eyes and a drumming in his ears.

"Scott," someone was saying, "I'm right sorry it is you."

The haze was lifting like a curtain, until he could see the room again. The major was perhaps four feet away, lighting another of his cigars. Old Breen, with one of his braces snapped, leaned against the table. Scott could hear the old man's breath.

"Hush, hush," it seemed to say. "Hush, hush."

There was a fourth man in the room, in Confederate uniform. Scott felt a wave of nausea as he saw him. The man was Travis Greene, whom he had met that very morning.

"Johnny," the major said, "you stand still."

"So it's you, Trav, is it?" Scott Mattaye was saying.

The other cleared his throat, looked at Scott and then away.

"Scott," he said, "I reported to the general your horse looked mighty bad. He sent me on to follow you. I was looking for a chance to get away. Scott, I'm sorry it should be you."

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Scott Mattaye answered dully. "Trav," he said, "I won't say what I think."

"I reckon I don't mind," said Greene. "That's part of it."

Scott drew in his breath. The old man's breathing, with its wheezing haste, was all that disturbed him.

"Trav," he said, "you better keep out of our lines, if once I get away."

"Scott," said Greene again, "it makes me sick it's you."

Then the major was speaking impersonally, almost kindly: "Listen, Johnny. I'd take you back as prisoner if I dared to run the risk, but we're too close to rebel cavalry for anything like that. This officer"—he waved his cigar slowly and was careful with his words—"this officer is going back where he's useful, son. You see my point. There's no hard feeling in it; you and I don't amount to shucks. This officer is going back, and there must be no—er—chance of your going. See my point?"

Scott moistened his lips.

"I understand," he said. "Well, I'd be pleased if you get it over with. Perhaps we'd all be pleased."

There was a silence. He heard Greene start to speak, and stop. The old man's breathing was easier. He became aware that the old man was watching him with his steady light-blue eyes.

"Gentlemen," said Grandpa Breen, "you leave this yere to me. There's been enough goin's on to attract attention. I'll gladly mind this yere."

There was no doubt of his meaning or any doubts that the major took his meaning. The major was buttoning his coat with steady, rapid fingers.

"There's a time," the old man said, "and a place for everything under the sun. Take him to the kitchen and tie him to the hick'ry chair. I'll fetch rope."

"Major," said Greene, "you take him."

"Oh," the major said, "let's get out of this! Come on!"

The major was a good hand with the ropes. He lashed Scott to the kitchen chair so efficiently that there was no chance of moving. Just above his head, where he could not see it, the clock was ticking, and the kettle was bubbling on the stove. Once he was alone, he found

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himself searching the pine floor for a speck of dust. They were in the parlour, talking. He could hear the murmur of their voices.

"... soon's it's dark," he heard the old man say.

"Major!" he shouted. "Here, you, Major!"

The door from the entry opened, he remembered, and the major stood there pulling on his gloves.

"Johnny," he said, "you keep your nerve."

"Yes, sir," said Scott, "I've got my nerve. I simply wish to ask you, are you leaving me alone?"

"Yes," the major said. "Johnny, keep your nerve."

Their glances met, but only for a fraction of a second, as though they saw something indecent in each other's eyes.

"I'm not letting your friend come in," the major said.

"You tell him good-bye," said Scott.

"Good-bye," the major said. "I should have shot you, Johnny, when you were rolling on the floor."

Then the kitchen door opened, letting in warm air that was sweet with the scent of hay. Old Mr. Breen, still in his shirt sleeves, was standing in the doorway with a shovel in his hand. The homeliness of the kitchen and the peaceful warmth from outdoors made everything grotesque.

"Brother," said Mr. Breen to the major, "the hosses are ready. You'd best be gittin' on. . . . And you, young man, I wish you no pain, but I know what you are figurin'. It won't do no good to holler. No one'll hear who cares. It won't do no good to tip over in the chair. I made it. It won't break. But I'll be near if you should call."

Scott Mattaye did not speak again, and the door slammed shut. He tried to move, but he was as helpless as a hog tied by the legs. First the dogs were yelping, and then there was a sound of hoofs outside the door, and then the place was still except for the humming of the kettle and the ticking of the clock, and in back of everything was that almost soundless vibration of cannon a long way off. He closed his eyes, but even when he closed them he could see Mr. Breen.

He had no proper sense of sequence, for his mind was like a sick man's; but there was one thing in his thoughts, Scott Mattaye remembered. He could not divide an hour from the next when his mind was carrying him to a hundred places. Bits of his life would

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whirl about him. He was shooting wild turkey at Deer Bottom; he was with the cavalry again; but there was one thing on his mind. He must not let the old man know that he was in deathly fear.

The light was growing softer outside the kitchen windows when the kitchen door opened again and Mr. Breen came in. Clay was smeared on his hands and over his gaunt, bare arms. He walked past the chair and began washing at the kitchen sink.

"Young man," said Mr. Breen, "do you need water?"

"No," said Scott. . . . "So you're going to kill me, mister?"

The old man walked in front of him with a clean towel in his hands.

"Yes," he said, "I'm the Lord's poor instrument. Young man, are you afraid?"

"No," said Scott, "but if I were you, I reckon I'd be afraid."

Old Mr. Breen stared down at him and began to wipe his hands.

"Did your people fear," he asked, "when they sent an anointed saint to heaven?"

"Mister," said Scott—and he kept his voice even—"I'd be pleased to know, for the comfort of my mind, when you propose to kill me."

"After dark," said Mr. Breen. "I don't aim to lug you out for burial in daylight. I'm pleased you ain't afraid. I ain't afraid, and I'll die presently. There's somethin' gits me—here."

Suddenly his eyes were childlike, Scott remembered. He was drawing his hand across his chest.

"Mister," said Scott quickly, "I've seen a heap of illness. Step here and show me where."

"Young man," said Mr. Breen, "I can read your mind, I guess. You want to tip your chair and yourself atop of me. No, young man. I'll be goin', but I'll be ready in case you call."

The light outside the kitchen windows was growing soft and mellow, and he could hear the cannon. The time was going past him like a flood again, leaving him motionless like a rock against that flow. For a long while he was entirely alone. As the dusk came down he heard the lowing of cows and the clatter of the milk pails which had stood beside the barn. It must have been when the old man had started milking that the little girl came in through the doorway from the entry. The door squeaked and opened just a crack at first.

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"Why, hello, honeybee," said Scott. "Come in. Don' go away. Sholy I can't hurt you, honeybee."

She came tiptoeing towards him. He did not blame her for being frightened.

"Honeybee," he said—the child was not attractive, but he could see she liked the name—"I'm powerful thirsty. Could you fetch a cup of water from the sink?"

"I'm scared," the little girl whispered.

"Why, shucks!" said Scott. "You scared—a saucy girl like you? You fetch that cup now, honeybee. Isn't your grandpop milking? How'll he know? . . . There . . . And I've got something for you in my coat. Just ease this rope off my hand so I can reach——"

"No," she whispered, "I'm too scared."

He could hear his own voice still, not like his own, with its undercurrent of appeal beneath its ridiculous pretence at playfulness, as he pleaded for life. He was ashamed of that moment always—his begging from a child so that one hand could be free.

"I dassent," she whispered, but he knew better. She would dare, because there was something inside his coat. All the repression of her life gleamed in her pale blue eyes in little points of light.

"Honeybee," said Scott, "it's something mighty fine—something you won't guess."

There was no sound which made him look up, but he had the sense that there was something different in the gathering of the dusk. The dusk seemed to settle over him like a blanket thrown about his head. He looked up to see the old man, standing in the doorway, watching. There was something in the way he stood that made Scott sure that he had planned that scene for his own pleasure. He must have been there for several minutes, as inevitable as the figure with the hourglass and the scythe.

"Mary Breen," the old man said, "you step away. Now, Mary Breen, you fetch the papers by the wood box. . . . So. Now lay 'em on the floor around the chair—under it. . . . You'd best lay on some more. And now go up to your chamber and close your door tight shut."

They were silent for a while. Old Mr. Breen seemed taller in the dark—more like an immense abstraction than a man.



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"It's gittin' dark," he said. "Young man, I'll leave you five minutes to say your prayers."

He turned on his heel silently, walked out and closed the door.

"Time," the clock was whispering, "time!"

Inside the stove a piece of wood snapped sharply. He could see the glow of coals through the lids on top. The homely smells of the kitchen came round him in a rush. He strained sideways at his ropes, and the heaviness of his breathing drowned every other sound.

"Help!" he shouted.

The dogs in the yard began to bark, so that his shout mingled with the wave of barking.

"Help!" he shouted. "Murder!"

He hitched forward, and the chair fell forward, throwing him head-first into the dusky whiteness of the paper on the floor. The blow on his head must have stunned him, but he could not have been out long. There was still a little daylight when he found himself, lying sideways, still lashed to the kitchen chair.

"Mister soldier!" someone was calling. "You hear me, mister soldier?" It was the little girl in the gingham dress again.

"Yes," he said, "I hear you, honeybee."

"It's grandpop," she was sobbing. "He's took again. He's flopped flat down right on the parlour floor. When you hollered, he flopped down."

"Yo' get a knife and cut me loose," said Scott. "I reckon I can help your grandpop then."

"Mister," she sobbed, "please, you won't hurt him?"

"No," he answered, "I won't hurt him."

Once he was loose, his arms and legs were useless for a while. They burned and ached, once the blood came back, until tears stood in his eyes.

"Strike a candle light," he said, "and help me up. I'm very pressed for time."

He hobbled through the entry. Old Mr. Breen was lying on the parlour floor, face up, flat out. The candle which the girl was holding made a frame about the high head and the flowing beard. He was conscious, in great pain, staring up at Scott Mattaye. Scott's own

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ivory-handled revolver was lying on the floor, where it must have fallen from old Breen's hand. He stooped painfully and picked it up, but for half a minute no one spoke.

"Your heart, sir?" said Scott. He was incomprehensibly courteous and polite, but the old man did not speak.

"Something gits him right across the chest," said Mary Breen. "It pulls him down."

"Set that candle on the table," Scott was speaking gently. He saw his belt and sabre in the corner. He walked over and strapped on his belt.

"Sir," he said, still gently, "I'm sorry to leave you in distress, but you and I don't matter. You've a horse in the barn, I recall yo' saying. I'm leaving you a hundred dollars on this table for the horse. I'll call at a neighbour's to send you help. . . . And now good night."

He was in the barnyard among the snarling dogs, holding a stable lantern. There was a heavy smell from hay and from the soft, warm breath of cattle. There was a drumming in his ears like the hurry of the clock.

"Time," it was saying, "time."

He heard himself speaking to Mary Breen, and then he was mounted and in the yard again. The horse was coarse and wild.

"Scuse me," Mary Breen was calling. "Ain't you forgot—some-  
thin' in your pocket?"

He pulled out the rest of his bills. "There," he said, "take 'em, honeybee."

He saw the house like a sharp, ungainly blot against the sky where a deep-red gash of something burning in the west made the outline clear. As he moved down the lane towards that distant glow, he did not know what he felt or thought, except that he must hurry, but suddenly he leaned forward on the neck of the farm horse. He felt sick—deathly sick.

There he was, sitting at his table at Deer Bottom, too old by any right to feel the force of memory. The wings of death were hovering near him, but no such death as that. He had the consolation from the knowledge he had gained that life was all dirt cheap.

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"Only two things," he said, "matter—accident and time. Now, Gettysburg—all that mattered were accident and time."

His mind was back on the night again. It always seemed to him that most of the Gettysburg affair was night—mistaken roads and Union pickets, and other roads choked by ammunition trains and infantry, and wounded moving back—two crawling, passing lines. Though the discipline was good, roads were always confused in the rear of a line of battle. There was the vagueness of a dream when one rode at such a time. There was no hope in haste or wishing.

"You come from Stuart?" someone said. "Well, it's too late for cavalry until we drive 'em. Where've you been? We've been fighting here since yesterday."

The night was never clear, but when he saw the leader of the army that was clear enough. He reported to General Lee at a quarter before ten in the morning, outside a half-demolished house on the outskirts of the town of Gettysburg.

Couriers were holding horses, and staff officers were standing a few paces back, so that he always thought of the general as entirely alone. He could remember a tall, solitary man with a greying beard and deep, dark eyes whose face was passionless. He was looking, Scott remembered, across a valley of green fields to a long, gentle slope, which was held by the Union lines about half a mile away.

He was speaking to a dusty, worried officer, Scott remembered, unhurriedly, except for one short gesture, and Scott could hear the words:

"Is he ready to attack, sir?"

"No, sir."

"Very well," the general said. "Hurry back; tell him he's very late already."

He stared back across the valley as Scott stood waiting. The stones of a cemetery were visible upon the ridge opposite, and an ugly building, which would be some sort of school. The ridge was heavy with troops, throwing up lines of earthworks. Beyond were the dust clouds of more troops moving up, and more. That ridge was a fine position, which was growing stronger every hour. Now and then there would be a burst of rifle fire, but there was no forward movement.

He stood waiting while the general looked, forgetting his fatigue as

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he watched. Then Scott saw him strike his hands together in a sudden, swift motion, and he heard him say:

"It's too bad—too bad."

Scott had a wish to be somewhere else. He felt like an eavesdropper who had heard a dangerous secret, but the general was turning towards him slowly.

"Well," he said, "what is it, Captain?"

"Captain Mattaye, sir," began Scott, "from General Stuart's staff——"

"Yes," the general stopped him. "When did you leave the general, Captain? How far is he along?"

"Six o'clock yesterday morning, sir," said Scott. "General Stuart was at Dover then."

For a moment the general looked at him, and it seemed to Scott that the general was very tired, though his expression did not change.

"Captain," the general said, "you're very late."

Scott felt his face grow red. "Sir——" he began, but the general stopped him.

"Never mind," he said. "Of course, you were delayed."

"Sir," said Scott, "will the general send me back with orders?"

"No"—the voice was tranquil and very courteous—"General Stuart has his orders. It's too late to make it better. . . . It would have been too late unless he had come yesterday." He raised his voice, and Scott knew again that he was thinking of time: "Colonel, send another officer to General Longstreet to find out his delay. And give this officer food and rest. He's too tired to go on."

CONAN DOYLE

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## ***The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans***

In the third week of November, in the year 1895, a dense yellow fog settled down upon London. From the Monday to the Thursday I doubt whether it was ever possible from our windows in Baker Street to see the loom of the opposite houses. The first day Holmes had spent in cross-indexing his huge book of references. The second and third had been patiently occupied upon a subject which he had recently made his hobby—the music of the Middle Ages. But when, for the fourth time, after pushing back our chairs from breakfast we saw the greasy, heavy brown swirl still drifting past us and condensing in oily drops upon the window-panes, my comrade's impatient and active nature could endure this drab existence no longer. He paced restlessly about our sitting-room in a fever of suppressed energy, biting his nails, tapping the furniture, and chafing against inaction.

"Nothing of interest in the paper, Watson?" he said.

I was aware that by anything of interest, Holmes meant anything of criminal interest. There was the news of a revolution, of a possible war, and of an impending change of Government; but these did not come within the horizon of my companion. I could see nothing recorded in the shape of crime which was not commonplace and futile. Holmes groaned and resumed his restless meanderings.

"The London criminal is certainly a dull fellow," said he, in the querulous voice of the sportsman whose game has failed him. "Look out of this window, Watson. See how the figures loom up, are dimly seen, and then blend once more into the cloud-bank. The thief or

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the murderer could roam London on such a day as the tiger does the jungle, unseen until he pounces, and then evident only to his victim."

"There have," said I, "been numerous petty thefts."

Holmes snorted his contempt.

"This great and sombre stage is set for something more worthy than that," said he. "It is fortunate for this community that I am not a criminal."

"It is, indeed!" said I, heartily.

"Suppose that I were Brooks or Woodhouse, or any of the fifty men who have good reason for taking my life, how long could I survive against my own pursuit? A summons, a bogus appointment, and all would be over. It is well they don't have days of fog in the Latin countries—the countries of assassination. By Jove! here comes something at last to break our dead monotony."

It was the maid with a telegram. Holmes tore it open and burst out laughing.

"Well, well! What next?" said he. "Brother Mycroft is coming round."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Why not? It is as if you met a tram-car coming down a country lane. Mycroft has his rails and he runs on them. His Pall Mall lodgings, the Diogenes Club, Whitehall—that is his cycle. Once, and only once, he has been here. What upheaval can possibly have derailed him?"

"Does he not explain?"

Holmes handed me his brother's telegram.

"Must see you over Cadogan West. Coming at once. MYCROFT."

"Cadogan West? I have heard the name."

"It recalls nothing to my mind. But that Mycroft should break out in this erratic fashion! A planet might as well leave its orbit. By the way, do you know what Mycroft is?"

I had some vague recollection of an explanation at the time of the Adventure of the Greek Interpreter.

"You told me that he had some small office under the British Government."

Holmes chuckled.

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"I did not know you quite so well in those days. One has to be discreet when one talks of high matters of state. You are right in thinking that he is under the British Government. You would also be right in a sense if you said that occasionally he *is* the British Government."

"My dear Holmes!"

"I thought I might surprise you. Mycroft draws four hundred and fifty pounds a year, remains a subordinate, has no ambitions of any kind, will receive neither honour nor title, but remains the most indispensable man in the country."

"But how?"

"Well, his position is unique. He has made it for himself. There has never been anything like it before, nor will be again. He has the tidiest and most orderly brain, with the greatest capacity for storing facts, of any man living. The same great powers which I have turned to the detection of crime he has used for this particular business. The conclusions of every department are passed to him, and he is the central exchange, the clearing-house, which makes out the balance. All other men are specialists, but his specialism is omniscience. We will suppose that a Minister needs information as to a point which involves the Navy, India, Canada and the bimetallic question; he could get his separate advices from various departments upon each, but only Mycroft can focus them all, and say off-hand how each factor would affect the other. They began by using him as a short-cut, a convenience; now he has made himself an essential. In that great brain of his everything is pigeon-holed, and can be handed out in an instant. Again and again his word has decided the national policy. He lives in it. He thinks of nothing else save when, as an intellectual exercise, he unbends if I call upon him and ask him to advise me on one of my little problems. But Jupiter is descending to-day. What on earth can it mean? Who is Cadogan West, and what is he to Mycroft?"

"I have it," I cried, and plunged among the litter of papers upon the sofa. "Yes, yes, here he is, sure enough! Cadogan West was the young man who was found dead on the Underground on Tuesday morning."

Holmes sat up at attention, his pipe half-way to his lips.

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"This must be serious, Watson. A death which has caused my brother to alter his habits can be no ordinary one. What in the world can he have to do with it? The case was featureless as I remember it. The young man had apparently fallen out of the train and killed himself. He had not been robbed, and there was no particular reason to suspect violence. Is that not so?"

"There has been an inquest," said I, "and a good many fresh facts have come out. Looked at more closely, I should certainly say that it was a curious case."

"Judging by its effect upon my brother, I should think it must be a most extraordinary one." He snuggled down in his armchair. "Now, Watson, let us have the facts."

"The man's name was Arthur Cadogan West. He was twenty-seven years of age, unmarried, and a clerk at Woolwich Arsenal."

"Government employ. Behold the link with brother Mycroft!"

"He left Woolwich suddenly on Monday night. Was last seen by his fiancée, Miss Violet Westbury, whom he left abruptly in the fog about 7.30 that evening. There was no quarrel between them and she can give no motive for his action. The next thing heard of him was when his dead body was discovered by a plate-layer named Mason, just outside Aldgate Station on the Underground system in London."

"When?"

"The body was found at six on the Tuesday morning. It was lying wide of the metals upon the left hand of the tracks as one goes eastward, at a point close to the station, where the line emerges from the tunnel in which it runs. The head was badly crushed—an injury which might well have been caused by a fall from the train. The body could only have come on the line in that way. Had it been carried down from any neighbouring street, it must have passed the station barriers, where a collector is always standing. This point seems absolutely certain."

"Very good. The case is definite enough. The man, dead or alive, either fell or was precipitated from a train. So much is clear to me. Continue."

"The trains which traverse the lines of rail beside which the body was found are those which run from west to east, some being purely



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Metropolitan, and some from Willesden and outlyidg junctions. It can be stated for certain that this young man, when he met his death, was travelling in this direction at some late hour of the night, but at what point he entered the train it is impossible to state."

"His ticket, of course, would show that."

"There was no ticket in his pockets."

"No ticket! Dear me, Watson, this is really very singular. According to my experience it is not possible to reach the platform of a Metropolitan train without exhibiting one's ticket. Presumably, then, the young man had one. Was it taken from him in order to conceal the station from which he came? It is possible. Or did he drop it in the carriage? That also is possible. But the point is of curious interest. I understand that there was no sign of robbery?"

"Apparently not. There is a list here of his possessions. His purse contained two pounds fifteen. He had also a cheque-book on the Woolwich branch of the Capital and Counties Bank. Through this his identity was established. There were also two dress-circle tickets for the Woolwich Theatre, dated for that very evening. Also a small packet of technical papers."

Holmes gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"There we have it at last, Watson! British Government—Woolwich Arsenal—Technical papers—Brother Mycroft, the chain is complete. But here he comes, if I am not mistaken, to speak for himself."

A moment later the tall and portly form of Mycroft Holmes was ushered into the room. Heavily built and massive, there was a suggestion of uncouth physical inertia in the figure, but above this unwieldy frame there was perched a head so masterful in its brow, so alert in its steel-grey, deep-set eyes, so firm in its lips, and so subtle in its play of expression, that after the first glance one forgot the gross body and remembered only the dominant mind.

At his heels came our old friend Lestrade, of Scotland Yard—thin and austere. The gravity of both their faces foretold some weighty quest. The detective shook hands without a word. Mycroft Holmes struggled out of his overcoat and subsided into an armchair.

"A most annoying business, Sherlock," said he. "I extremely dislike altering my habits, but the powers that be would take no

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denial. In the present state of Siam it is most awkward that I should be away from the office. But it is a real crisis. I have never seen the Prime Minister so upset. As to the Admiralty—it is buzzing like an overturned bee-hive. Have you read up the case?”

“We have just done so. What were the technical papers?”

“Ah, there’s the point! Fortunately, it has not come out. The Press would be furious if it did. The papers which this wretched youth had in his pocket were the plans of the Bruce-Partington submarine.”

Mycroft Holmes spoke with a solemnity which showed his sense of the importance of the subject. His brother and I sat expectant.

“Surely you have heard of it? I thought everyone had heard of it.”

“Only as a name.”

“Its importance can hardly be exaggerated. It has been the most jealously guarded of all Government secrets. You may take it from me that naval warfare becomes impossible within the radius of a Bruce-Partington’s operation. Two years ago a very large sum was smuggled through the Estimates and was expended in acquiring a monopoly of the invention. Every effort has been made to keep the secret. The plans, which are exceedingly intricate, comprising some thirty separate patents, each essential to the working of the whole, are kept in an elaborate safe in a confidential office adjoining the Arsenal, with burglar-proof doors and windows. Under no conceivable circumstances were the plans to be taken from the office. If the Chief Constructor of the Navy desired to consult them, even he was forced to go to the Woolwich office for the purpose. And yet here we find them in the pockets of a dead junior clerk in the heart of London. From an official point of view it’s simply awful.”

“But you have recovered them?”

“No, Sherlock, no! That’s the pinch. We have not. Ten papers were taken from Woolwich. There were seven in the pockets of Cadogan West. The three most essential are gone—stolen, vanished. You must drop everything, Sherlock. Never mind your usual petty puzzles of the police-court. It’s a vital international problem that you have to solve. Why did Cadogan West take the papers, where are the missing ones, how did he die, how came his body where it was found, how can the evil be set right? Find an answer to all these questions, and you will have done good service for your country.”

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"Why do you not solve it yourself, Mycroft? You can see as far as I."

"Possibly, Sherlock. But it is a question of getting details. Give me your details, and from an armchair I will return you an excellent expert opinion. But to run here and run there, to cross-question railway guards, and lie on my face with a lens to my eye—it is not my *métier*. No, you are the one man who can clear the matter up. If you have a fancy to see your name in the next honours list——"

My friend smiled and shook his head.

"I play the game for the game's own sake," said he. "But the problem certainly presents some points of interest, and I shall be very pleased to look into it. Some more facts, please."

"I have jotted down the more essential ones upon this sheet of paper, together with a few addresses which you will find of service. The actual official guardian of the papers is the famous Government expert, Sir James Walter, whose decorations and sub-titles fill two lines of a book of reference. He has grown grey in the service, is a gentleman, a favoured guest in the most exalted houses, and above all a man whose patriotism is beyond suspicion. He is one of two who have a key of the safe. I may add that the papers were undoubtedly in the office during working hours on Monday, and that Sir James left for London about three o'clock taking his key with him. He was at the house of Admiral Sinclair at Barclay Square during the whole of the evening when this incident occurred."

"Has the fact been verified?"

"Yes; his brother, Colonel Valentine Walter, has testified to his departure from Woolwich, and Admiral Sinclair to his arrival in London; so Sir James is no longer a direct factor in the problem."

"Who was the other man with a key?"

"The senior clerk and draughtsman, Mr. Sidney Johnson. He is a man of forty, married, with five children. He is a silent, morose man, but he has, on the whole, an excellent record in the public service. He is unpopular with his colleagues, but a hard worker. According to his own account, corroborated only by the word of his wife, he was at home the whole of Monday evening after office hours, and his key has never left the watch-chain upon which it hangs."

"Tell us about Cadogan West."

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"He has been ten years in the Service, and has done good work. He has the reputation of being hot-headed and impetuous, but a straight, honest man. We have nothing against him. He was next Sidney Johnson in the office. His duties brought him into daily, personal contact with the plans. No one else had the handling of them."

"Who locked the plans up that night?"

"Mr. Sidney Johnson, the senior clerk."

"Well, it is surely perfectly clear who took them away. They are actually found upon the person of this junior clerk, Cadogan West. That seems final, does it not?"

"It does, Sherlock, and yet it leaves so much unexplained. In the first place, why did he take them?"

"I presume they were of value?"

"He could have got several thousands for them very easily."

"Can you suggest any possible motive for taking the papers to London except to sell them?"

"No, I cannot."

"Then we must take that as our working hypothesis. Young West took the papers. Now this could only be done by having a false key——"

"Several false keys. He had to open the building and the room."

"He had, then, several false keys. He took the papers to London to sell the secret, intending, no doubt, to have the plans themselves back in the safe next morning before they were missed. While in London on this treasonable mission he met his end."

"How?"

"We will suppose that he was travelling back to Woolwich when he was killed and thrown out of the compartment."

"Aldgate, where the body was found, is considerably past the station for London Bridge, which would be his route to Woolwich."

"Many circumstances could be imagined under which he would pass London Bridge. There was someone in the carriage, for example, with whom he was having an absorbing interview. This interview led to a violent scene, in which he lost his life. Possibly he tried to leave the carriage, fell out on the line, and so met his end. The other closed the door. There was a thick fog, and nothing could be seen."

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"No better explanation can be given with our present knowledge; and yet consider, Sherlock, how much you leave untouched. We will suppose, for argument's sake, that young Cadogan West *had* determined to convey these papers to London. He would naturally have made an appointment with the foreign agent and kept his evening clear. Instead of that he took two tickets for the theatre, escorted his fiancée half-way there, and then suddenly disappeared."

"A blind," said Lestrade, who had sat listening with some impatience to the conversation.

"A very singular one. That is objection No. 1. Objection No. 2: We will suppose that he reaches London and sees the foreign agent. He must bring back the papers before morning or the loss will be discovered. He took away ten. Only seven were in his pocket. What had become of the other three? He certainly would not leave them of his own free will. Then, again, where is the price of his treason? One would have expected to find a large sum of money in his pocket."

"It seems to me perfectly clear," said Lestrade. "I have no doubt at all as to what occurred. He took the papers to sell them. He saw the agent. They could not agree as to price. He started home again, but the agent went with him. In the train the agent murdered him, took the more essential papers, and threw his body from the carriage. That would account for everything, would it not?"

"Why had he no ticket?"

"The ticket would have shown which station was nearest the agent's house. Therefore he took it from the murdered man's pocket."

"Good, Lestrade, very good," said Holmes. "Your theory holds together. But if this is true, then the case is at an end. On the one hand the traitor is dead. On the other the plans of the Bruce-Partington submarine are presumably already on the Continent. What is there for us to do?"

"To act, Sherlock—to act!" cried Mycroft, springing to his feet. "All my instincts are against this explanation. Use your powers! Go to the scene of the crime! See the people concerned! Leave no stone unturned! In all your career you have never had so great a chance of serving your country."

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"Well, well!" said Holmes, shrugging his shoulders. "Come, Watson! And you, Lestrade, could you favour us with your company for an hour or two? We will begin our investigation by a visit to Aldgate Station. Good-bye, Mycroft. I shall let you have a report before evening, but I warn you in advance that you have little to expect."

An hour later, Holmes, Lestrade and I, stood upon the underground railroad at the point where it emerges from the tunnel immediately before Aldgate Station. A courteous red-faced old gentleman represented the railway company.

"This is where the young man's body lay," said he, indicating a spot about three feet from the metals. "It could not have fallen from above, for these, as you see, are all blank walls. Therefore, it could only have come from a train, and that train, so far as we can trace it, must have passed about midnight on Monday."

"Have the carriages been examined for any sign of violence?"

"There are no such signs, and no ticket has been found."

"No record of a door being found open?"

"None."

"We have had some fresh evidence this morning," said Lestrade. "A passenger who passed Aldgate in an ordinary Metropolitan train about 11.40 on Monday night declares that he heard a heavy thud, as of a body striking the line, just before the train reached the station. There was dense fog, however, and nothing could be seen. He made no report of it at the time. Why, whatever is the matter with Mr. Holmes?"

My friend was standing with an expression of strained intensity upon his face, staring at the railway metals where they curved out of the tunnel. Aldgate is a junction, and there was a network of points. On these his eager, questioning eyes were fixed, and I saw on his keen, alert face that tightening of the lips, that quiver of the nostrils, and concentration of the heavy tufted brows which I knew so well.

"Points," he muttered; "the points."

"What of it? What do you mean?"

"I suppose there are no great number of points on a system such as this?"

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"No; there are very few."

"And a curve, too. Points, and a curve. By Jove! if it were only so."

"What is it, Mr. Holmes? Have you a clue?"

"An idea—an indication, no more. But the case certainly grows in interest. Unique, perfectly unique, and yet why not? I do not see any indications of bleeding on the line."

"There were hardly any."

"But I understand that there was a considerable wound."

"The bone was crushed, but there was no great external injury."

"And yet one would have expected some bleeding. Would it be possible for me to inspect the train which contained the passenger who heard the thud of a fall in the fog?"

"I fear not, Mr. Holmes. The train has been broken up before now, and the carriages redistributed."

"I can assure you, Mr. Holmes," said Lestrade, "that every carriage has been carefully examined. I saw to it myself."

It was one of my friend's most obvious weaknesses that he was impatient with less alert intelligences than his own.

"Very likely," said he, turning away. "As it happens, it was not the carriages which I desired to examine. Watson, we have done all we can here. We need not trouble you any further, Mr. Lestrade. I think our investigations must now carry us to Woolwich."

At London Bridge, Holmes wrote a telegram to his brother, which he handed to me before dispatching it. It ran thus:

See some light in the darkness, but it may possibly flicker out. Meanwhile, please send by messenger, to await return at Baker Street, a complete list of all foreign spies or international agents known to be in England, with full address.—SHERLOCK.

"That should be helpful, Watson," he remarked, as we took our seats in the Woolwich train. "We certainly owe brother Mycroft a debt for having introduced us to what promises to be a really very remarkable case."

His eager face still wore that expression of intense and high-strung energy, which showed me that some novel and suggestive circumstance had opened up a stimulating line of thought. See the foxhound

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with hanging ears and drooping tail as it lolls about the kennels, and compare it with the same hound as, with gleaming eyes and straining muscles, it runs upon a breast-high scent—such was the change in Holmes since the morning. He was a different man to the limp and lounging figure in the mouse-coloured dressing-gown who had prowled so restlessly only a few hours before round the fog-girt room.

"There is material here. There is scope," said he. "I am dull indeed not to have understood its possibilities."

"Even now they are dark to me."

"The end is dark to me also, but I have hold of one idea which may lead us far. The man met his death elsewhere, and his body was on the *roof* of a carriage."

"On the roof!"

"Remarkable, is it not? But consider the facts. Is it a coincidence that it is found at the very point where the train pitches and sways as it comes round on the points? Is not that the place where an object upon the roof might be expected to fall off? The points would affect no object inside the train. Either the body fell from the roof, or a very curious coincidence has occurred. But now consider the question of the blood. Of course, there was no bleeding on the line if the body had bled elsewhere. Each fact is suggestive in itself. Together they have a cumulative force."

"And the ticket, too!" I cried.

"Exactly. We could not explain the absence of a ticket. This would explain it. Everything fits together."

"But suppose it were so, we are still as far as ever from unravelling the mystery of his death. Indeed, it becomes not simpler, but stranger."

"Perhaps," said Holmes, thoughtfully; "perhaps." He relapsed into a silent reverie, which lasted until the slow train drew up at last in Woolwich Station. There he called a cab and drew Mycroft's paper from his pocket.

"We have quite a little round of afternoon calls to make," said he. "I think that Sir James Walter claims our first attention."

The house of the famous official was a fine villa with green lawns stretching down to the Thames. As we reached it the fog was lifting,



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and a thin, watery sunshine was breaking through. A butler answered our ring.

"Sir James, sir!" said he, with solemn face. "Sir James died this morning."

"Good heavens!" cried Holmes, in amazement. "How did he die?"

"Perhaps you would care to step in, sir, and see his brother, Colonel Valentine?"

"Yes, we had best do so."

We were ushered into a dim-lit drawing-room, where an instant later we were joined by a very tall, handsome, light-bearded man of fifty, the younger brother of the dead scientist. His wild eyes, stained cheeks, and unkempt hair all spoke of the sudden blow which had fallen upon the household. He was hardly articulate as he spoke of it.

"It was this horrible scandal," said he. "My brother, Sir James, was a man of very sensitive honour, and he could not survive such an affair. It broke his heart. He was always so proud of the efficiency of his department, and this was a crushing blow."

"We had hoped that he might have given us some indications which would have helped us to clear the matter up."

"I assure you that it was all a mystery to him as it is to you and to all of us. He had already put all his knowledge at the disposal of the police. Naturally, he had no doubt that Cadogan West was guilty. But all the rest was inconceivable."

"You cannot throw any new light upon the affair?"

"I know nothing myself save what I have read or heard. I have no desire to be discourteous, but you can understand, Mr. Holmes, that we are much disturbed at present, and I must ask you to hasten this interview to an end."

"This is indeed an unexpected development," said my friend when we had regained the cab. "I wonder if the death was natural, or whether the poor old fellow killed himself! If the latter, may it be taken as some sign of self-reproach for duty neglected? We must leave that question to the future. Now we shall turn to the Cadogan Wests."

A small but well-kept house in the outskirts of the town sheltered

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the bereaved mother. The old lady was too dazed with grief to be of any use to us, but at her side was a white-faced young lady, who introduced herself as Miss Violet Westbury, the fiancée of the dead man, and the last to see him upon that fatal night.

"I cannot explain it, Mr. Holmes," she said. "I have not shut an eye since the tragedy, thinking, thinking, thinking, night and day, what the true meaning of it can be. Arthur was the most single-minded, chivalrous, patriotic man upon earth. He would have cut his right hand off before he would sell a State secret confided to his keeping. It is absurd, impossible, preposterous to anyone who knew him."

"But the facts, Miss Westbury?"

"Yes, yes; I admit I cannot explain them."

"Was he in any want of money?"

"No; his needs were very simple and his salary ample. He had saved a few hundreds, and we were to marry at the New Year."

"No signs of any mental excitement? Come, Miss Westbury, be absolutely frank with us."

The quick eye of my companion had noted some change in her manner. She coloured and hesitated.

"Yes," she said, at last. "I had a feeling that there was something on his mind."

"For long?"

"Only for the last week or so. He was thoughtful and worried. Once I pressed him about it. He admitted that there was something, and that it was concerned with his official life. 'It is too serious for me to speak about, even to you,' said he. I could get nothing more."

Holmes looked grave.

"Go on, Miss Westbury. Even if it seems to tell against him, go on. We cannot say what it may lead to."

"Indeed I have nothing more to tell. Once or twice it seemed to me that he was on the point of telling me something. He spoke one evening of the importance of the secret, and I have some recollection that he said that no doubt foreign spies would pay a great deal to have it."

My friend's face grew graver still.

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"Anything else?"

"He said that we were slack about such matters—that it would be easy for a traitor to get the plans."

"Was it only recently that he made such remarks?"

"Yes, quite recently."

"Now tell us of that last evening."

"We were to go to the theatre. The fog was so thick that a cab was useless. We walked, and our way took us close to the office. Suddenly he darted away into the fog."

"Without a word?"

"He gave an exclamation; that was all. I waited but he never returned. Then I walked home. Next morning, after the office opened, they came to inquire. About twelve o'clock we heard the terrible news. Oh, Mr. Holmes, if you could only, only save his honour! It was so much to him."

Holmes shook his head sadly.

"Come, Watson," said he, "our ways lie elsewhere. Our next station must be the office from which the papers were taken. . . .

"It was black enough before against this young man, but our inquiries make it blacker," he remarked, as the cab lumbered off. "His coming marriage gives a motive for the crime. He naturally wanted money. The idea was in his head, since he spoke about it. He nearly made the girl an accomplice in the treason by telling her his plans. It is all very bad."

"But surely, Holmes, character goes for something? Then, again, why should he leave the girl in the street and dart away to commit a felony?"

"Exactly! There are certainly objections. But it is a formidable case which they have to meet."

Mr. Sidney Johnson, the senior clerk, met us at the office, and received us with that respect which my companion's card always commanded. He was a thin, gruff, bespectacled man of middle age, his cheeks haggard, and his hands twitching from the nervous strain to which he had been subjected.

"It is bad, Mr. Holmes, very bad! Have you heard of the death of the chief?"

"We have just come from his house."

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"The place is disorganized. The chief dead, Cadogan West dead, our papers stolen. And yet, when we closed our door on Monday evening we were as efficient an office as any in the Government service. Good God, it's dreadful to think of! That West, of all men, should have done such a thing!"

"You are sure of his guilt, then?"

"I can see no other way out of it. And yet I would have trusted him as I trust myself."

"At what hour was the office closed on Monday?"

"At five."

"Did you close it?"

"I am always the last man out."

"Where were the plans?"

"In that safe. I put them there myself."

"Is there no watchman to the building?"

"There is; but he has other departments to look after as well. He is an old soldier and a most trustworthy man. He saw nothing that evening. Of course, the fog was very thick."

"Suppose that Cadogan West wished to make his way into the building after hours; he would need three keys, would he not, before he could reach the papers?"

"Yes, he would. The key of the outer door, the key of the office, and the key of the safe."

"Only Sir James Walter and you had those keys?"

"I had no keys of the doors—only of the safe."

"Was Sir James a man who was orderly in his habits?"

"Yes, I think he was. I know that so far as those three keys are concerned he kept them on the same ring. I have often seen them there."

"And that ring went with him to London?"

"He said so."

"And your key never left your possession?"

"Never."

"Then West, if he is the culprit, must have had a duplicate. And yet none was found upon his body. One other point: if a clerk in this office desired to sell the plans, would it not be simpler to copy the plans for himself than to take the originals, as was actually done?"

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"It would take considerable technical knowledge to copy the plans in an effective way."

"But I suppose either Sir James, or you, or West had that technical knowledge?"

"No doubt we had, but I beg you won't try to drag me into the matter, Mr. Holmes. What is the use of our speculating in this way when the original plans were actually found on West?"

"Well, it is certainly singular that he should run the risk of taking originals if he could safely have taken copies, which would have equally served his turn."

"Singular, no doubt—and yet he did so."

"Every inquiry in this case reveals something inexplicable. Now there are three papers still missing. They are, as I understand, the vital ones."

"Yes, that is so."

"Do you mean to say that anyone holding these three papers, and without the seven others, could construct a Bruce-Partington submarine?"

"I reported to that effect to the Admiralty. But to-day I have been over the drawings again, and I am not so sure of it. The double valves with the automatic self-adjusting slots are drawn in one of the papers which have been returned. Until the foreigners had invented that for themselves they could not make the boat. Of course, they might soon get over the difficulty."

"But the three missing drawings are the most important?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I think, with your permission, I will now take a stroll round the premises. I do not recall any other question which I desired to ask."

He examined the lock of the safe, the door of the room, and finally the iron shutters of the window. It was only when we were on the lawn outside that his interest was strongly excited. There was a laurel bush outside the window, and several of the branches bore signs of having been twisted or snapped. He examined them carefully with his lens, and then some dim and vague marks upon the earth beneath. Finally he asked the chief clerk to close the iron shutters, and he pointed out to me that they hardly met in the centre,

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and that it would be possible for anyone outside to see what was going on within the room.

"The indications are ruined by the three days' delay. They may mean something or nothing. Well, Watson, I do not think that Woolwich can help us further. It is a small crop which we have gathered. Let us see if we can do better in London."

Yet we added one more sheaf to our harvest before we left Woolwich Station. The clerk in the ticket office was able to say with confidence that he saw Cadogan West—whom he knew well by sight—upon the Monday night, and that he went to London by the 8.15 to London Bridge. He was alone, and took a single third-class ticket. The clerk was struck at the time by his excited and nervous manner. So shaky was he that he could hardly pick up his change, and the clerk had helped him with it. A reference to the time-table showed that the 8.15 was the first train which it was possible for West to take after he had left the lady about 7.30.

"Let us reconstruct, Watson," said Holmes, after half an hour of silence. "I am not aware that in all our joint researches we have ever had a case which was more difficult to get at. Every fresh advance which we make only reveals a fresh ridge beyond. And yet we have surely made some appreciable progress.

"The effect of our inquiries at Woolwich has in the main been against young Cadogan West; but the indications at the window would lend themselves to a more favourable hypothesis. Let us suppose, for example, that he had been approached by some foreign agent. It might have been done under such pledges as would have prevented him from speaking of it, and yet would have affected his thoughts in the direction indicated by his remarks to his fiancée. Very good. We will now suppose that as he went to the theatre with the young lady he suddenly, in the fog, caught a glimpse of this same agent going in the direction of the office. He was an impetuous man, quick in his decisions. Everything gave way to his duty. He followed the man, reached the window, saw the abstraction of the documents, and pursued the thief. In this way we get over the objection that no one would take originals when he could make copies. This outsider had to take originals. So far it holds together."

"What is the next step?"

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"Then we come into difficulties. One would imagine that under such circumstances the first act of young Cadogan West would be to seize the villain and raise the alarm. Why did he not do so? Could it have been an official superior who took the papers? That would explain West's conduct. Or could the thief have given West the slip in the fog, and West started at once to London to head him off from his own rooms, presuming that he knew where the rooms were? The call must have been very pressing, since he left his girl standing in the fog, and made no effort to communicate with her. Our scent runs cold here, and there is a vast gap between either hypothesis and the laying of West's body, with seven papers in his pocket, on the roof of a Metropolitan train. My instinct now is to work from the other end. If Mycroft has given us the list of addresses we may be able to pick our man, and follow two tracks instead of one."

Surely enough, a note awaited us at Baker Street. A Government messenger had brought it post-haste. Holmes glanced at it and threw it over to me.

There are numerous small fry, but few who would handle so big an affair. The only men worth considering are Adolph Meyer, of 13, Great George Street, Westminster; Louis La Rothière, of Campden Mansions, Notting Hill; and Hugo Oberstein, 13, Caulfield Gardens, Kensington. The latter was known to be in town on Monday, and is now reported as having left. Glad to hear you have seen some light. The Cabinet awaits your final report with the utmost anxiety. Urgent representations have arrived from the very highest quarter. The whole force of the State is at your back if you should need it.—

MYCROFT.

"I'm afraid," said Holmes, smiling, "that all the Queen's horses and all the Queen's men cannot avail in this matter." He had spread out his big map of London, and leaned eagerly over it. "Well, well," said he presently, with an exclamation of satisfaction, "things are turning a little in our direction at last. Why, Watson, I do honestly believe that we are going to pull it off after all." He slapped me on the shoulder with a sudden burst of hilarity. "I am going out now.

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It is only a reconnaissance. I will do nothing serious without my trusted comrade and biographer at my elbow. Do you stay here, and the odds are that you will see me again in an hour or two. If time hangs heavy get foolscap and a pen, and begin your narrative of how we saved the State."

I felt some reflection of his elation in my own mind, for I knew well that he would not depart so far from his usual austerity of demeanour unless there was good cause for exultation. All the long November evening I waited, filled with impatience for his return. At last, shortly after nine o'clock there arrived a messenger with a note:

Am dining at Goldini's Restaurant, Gloucester Road, Kensington. Please come at once and join me there. Bring with you a jemmy, a dark lantern, a chisel, and a revolver.—S.H.

It was a nice equipment for a respectable citizen to carry through the dim, fog-draped streets. I stowed them all discreetly away in my overcoat, and drove straight to the address given. There sat my friend at a little round table near the door of the garish Italian restaurant.

"Have you had something to eat? Then join me in a coffee and curaçao. Try one of the proprietor's cigars. They are less poisonous than one would expect. Have you the tools?"

"They are here, in my overcoat."

"Excellent. Let me give you a short sketch of what I have done, with some indication of what we are about to do. Now it must be evident to you, Watson, that this young man's body was *placed* on the roof of the train. That was clear from the instant that I determined the fact that it was from the roof, and not from a carriage, that he had fallen."

"Could it not have been dropped from a bridge?"

"I should say it was impossible. If you examine the roofs you will find that they are slightly rounded, and there is no railing round them. Therefore, we can say for certain that young Cadogan West was placed on it."

"How could he be placed there?"

"That was the question which we had to answer. There is only one possible way. You are aware that the underground runs clear of



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tunnels at some points in the West End. I had a vague memory that as I have travelled by it I have occasionally seen windows just above my head. Now, suppose that a train halted under such a window, would there be any difficulty in laying a body upon the roof?"

"It seems most improbable."

"We must fall back upon the old axiom that when all other contingencies fail, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Here all other contingencies *have* failed. When I found that the leading international agent, who had just left London, lived in a row of houses which abutted upon the Underground, I was so pleased that you were a little astonished at my sudden frivolity."

"Oh, that was it, was it?"

"Yes, that was it. Mr. Hugo Oberstein, of 13, Caulfield Gardens, had become my objective. I began my operations at Gloucester Road Station, where a very helpful official walked with me along the track, and allowed me to satisfy myself, not only that the back-stair windows of Caulfield Gardens open on the line, but the even more essential fact that, owing to the intersection of one of the larger railways, the Underground trains are frequently held motionless for some minutes at that very spot."

"Splendid, Holmes! You have got it!"

"So far—so far, Watson. We advance, but the goal is afar. Well, having seen the back of Caulfield Gardens, I visited the front and satisfied myself that the bird was indeed flown. It is a considerable house, unfurnished, so far as I could judge, in the upper rooms. Oberstein lived there with a single valet, who was probably a confederate entirely in his confidence. We must bear in mind that Oberstein has gone to the Continent to dispose of his booty, but not with any idea of flight; for he had no reason to fear a warrant, and the idea of an amateur domiciliary visit would certainly never occur to him. Yet that is precisely what we are about to make."

"Could we not get a warrant and legalise it?"

"Hardly on the evidence."

"What can we hope to do?"

"We cannot tell what correspondence may be there."

"I don't like it, Holmes."

"My dear fellow, you shall keep watch in the street. I'll do the

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criminal part. It's not a time to stick at trifles. Think of Mycroft's note, of the Admiralty, the Cabinet, the exalted person who waits for news. We are bound to go."

My answer was to rise from the table.

"You are right, Holmes. We are bound to go."

He sprang up and shook me by the hand.

"I knew you would not shrink at the last," said he, and for a moment I saw something in his eyes which was nearer to tenderness than I had ever seen. The next instant he was his masterful, practical self once more.

"It is nearly half a mile, but there is no hurry. Let us walk," said he. "Don't drop the instruments, I beg. Your arrest as a suspicious character would be a most unfortunate complication."

Caulfield Gardens was one of those lines of flat-faced, pillared, and porticoed houses which are so prominent a product of the middle Victorian epoch in the West End of London. Next door there appeared to be a children's party, for the merry buzz of young voices and the clatter of a piano resounded through the night. The fog still hung about and screened us with its friendly shade. Holmes had lit his lantern and flashed it upon the massive door.

"This is a serious proposition," said he. "It is certainly bolted as well as locked. We would do better in the area. There is an excellent archway down yonder in case a too zealous policeman should intrude. Give me a hand, Watson, and I'll do the same for you."

A minute later we were both in the area. Hardly had we reached the dark shadows before the step of the policeman was heard in the fog above. As its soft rhythm died away, Holmes set to work upon the lower door. I saw him stoop and strain until with a sharp crash it flew open. We sprang through into the dark passage, closing the area door behind us. Holmes led the way up the curving, uncarpeted stair. His little fan of yellow light shone upon a low window.

"Here we are, Watson—this must be the one." He threw it open, and as he did so there was a low, harsh murmur, growing steadily into a loud roar as a train dashed past us in the darkness. Holmes swept his light along the window sill. It was thickly coated with soot from the passing engines, but the black surface was blurred and rubbed in places.

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"You can see where they rested the body. Halloa, Watson! what is this? There can be no doubt that it is a blood mark." He was pointing to faint discolorations along the woodwork of the window. "Here it is on the stone of the stair also. The demonstration is complete. Let us stay here until a train stops."

We had not long to wait. The very next train roared from the tunnel as before, but slowed in the open, and then, with a creaking of brakes, pulled up immediately beneath us. It was not four feet from the window-ledge to the roof of the carriages. Holmes softly closed the window.

"So far we are justified," said he. "What do you think of it, Watson?"

"A masterpiece. You have never risen to a greater height."

"I cannot agree with you there. From the moment that I conceived the idea of the body being upon the roof, which surely was not a very abstruse one, all the rest was inevitable. If it were not for the grave interests involved the affair up to this point would be insignificant. Our difficulties are still before us. But perhaps we may find something here which may help us."

We had ascended the kitchen stair and entered the suite of rooms upon the first floor. One was a dining-room, severely furnished and containing nothing of interest. A second was a bedroom, which also drew blank. The remaining room appeared more promising, and my companion settled down to a systematic examination. It was littered with books and papers, and was evidently used as a study. Swiftly and methodically Holmes turned over the contents of drawer after drawer and cupboard after cupboard, but no gleam of success came to brighten his austere face. At the end of an hour he was no further than when he started.

"The cunning dog has covered his tracks," said he. "He has left nothing to incriminate him. His dangerous correspondence has been destroyed or removed. This is our last chance."

It was a small tin cash-box which stood upon the writing-desk. Holmes prised it open with his chisel. Several rolls of paper were within, covered with figures and calculations, without any note to show to what they referred. The recurring words, "Water pressure" and "Pressure to the square inch" suggested some possible relation

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to a submarine. Holmes tossed them all impatiently aside. There only remained an envelope with some small news-slips inside it. He shook them out on the table, and at once I saw by his eager face that his hopes had been raised.

"What's this, Watson? Eh? What's this? Record of a series of messages in the advertisements of a paper. *Daily Telegraph* agony column by the print and paper. Right-hand top corner of a page. No dates—but messages arrange themselves. This must be the first:

" 'Hoped to hear sooner. Terms agreed to. Write fully to address given on card.—Pierrot.'

"Next comes: 'Too complex for description. Must have full report. Stuff awaits you when goods delivered.—Pierrot.'

"Then comes 'Matter presses. Must withdraw offer unless contract completed. Make appointment by letter. Will confirm by advertisement.—Pierrot.'

"Finally: 'Monday night after nine. Two taps. Only ourselves. Do not be so suspicious. Payment in hard cash when goods delivered.—Pierrot.'

"A fairly complete record, Watson! If we could only get at the man at the other end!" He sat lost in thought, tapping his fingers on the table. Finally he sprang to his feet.

"Well, perhaps it won't be so difficult after all. There is nothing more to be done here, Watson. I think we might drive round to the offices of the *Daily Telegraph*, and so bring a good day's work to a conclusion."

Mycroft Holmes and Lestrade had come round by appointment after breakfast next day and Sherlock Holmes had recounted to them our proceedings of the day before. The professional shook his head over our confessed burglary.

"We can't do these things in the force, Mr. Holmes," said he. "No wonder you get results that are beyond us. But one of these days you'll go too far, and you'll find yourself and your friend in trouble."

"For England, home and beauty—eh, Watson? Martyrs on the altar of our country. But what do you think of it, Mycroft?"

"Excellent, Sherlock! Admirable! But what use will you make of it?"

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Holmes picked up the *Daily Telegraph* which lay upon the table.

"Have you seen Pierror's advertisement to-day?"

"What! Another one?"

"Yes, here it is: 'To-night. Same hour. Same place. Two taps. Most vitally important. Your own safety at stake.—Pierrot.' "

"By George!" cried Lestrade. "If he answers that we've got him!"

"That was my idea when I put it in. I think if you could both make it convenient to come with us about eight o'clock to Caulfield Gardens we might possibly get a little nearer to a solution."

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Sherlock Holmes was his power of throwing his brain out of action and switching all his thoughts on to lighter things whenever he had convinced himself that he could no longer work to advantage. I remember that during the whole of that memorable day he lost himself in a monograph which he had undertaken upon the Polyphonic Motets of Lassus. For my own part I had none of this power of detachment, and the day, in consequence, appeared to be interminable. The great national importance of the issue, the suspense in high quarters, the direct nature of the experiment which we were trying—all combined to work upon my nerve. It was a relief to me when at last, after a light dinner, we set out upon our expedition. Lestrade and Mycroft met us by appointment at the outside of Gloucester Road Station. The area door of Oberstein's house had been left open the night before, and it was necessary for me, as Mycroft Holmes absolutely and indignantly declined to climb the railings, to pass in and open the hall door. By nine o'clock we were all seated in the study, waiting patiently for our man.

An hour passed and yet another. When eleven struck, the measured beat of the great church clock seemed to sound the dirge of our hopes. Lestrade and Mycroft were fidgeting in their seats and looking twice a minute at their watches. Holmes sat silent and composed, his eyelids half shut, but every sense on the alert. He raised his head with a sudden jerk.

"He is coming," said he.

There had been a furtive step past the door. Now it returned. We heard a shuffling sound outside, and then two sharp taps with

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the knocker. Holmes rose, motioning to us to remain seated. The gas in the hall was a mere point of light. He opened the outer door, and then as a dark figure slipped past him he closed and fastened it. "This way!" we heard him say, and a moment later our man stood before us. Holmes had followed him closely, and as the man turned with a cry of surprise and alarm he caught him by the collar and threw him back into the room. Before our prisoner had recovered his balance the door was shut and Holmes standing with his back against it. The man glared round him, staggered, and fell senseless upon the floor. With the shock, his broad-brimmed hat flew from his head, his cravat slipped down from his lips, and there was the long light beard and the soft, handsome delicate features of Colonel Valentine Walter.

Holmes gave a whistle of surprise.

"You can write me down an ass this time, Watson," said he. "This was not the bird that I was looking for."

"Who is he?" asked Mycroft eagerly.

"The younger brother of the late Sir James Walter, the head of the Submarine Department. Yes, yes; I see the fall of the cards. He is coming to. I think that you had best leave his examination to me."

We had carried the prostrate body to the sofa. Now our prisoner sat up, looked round him with a horror-stricken face, and passed his hand over his forehead, like one who cannot believe his own senses.

"What is this?" he asked. "I came here to visit Mr. Oberstein."

"Everything is known, Colonel Walter," said Holmes. "How an English gentleman could behave in such a manner is beyond my comprehension. But your whole correspondence and relations with Oberstein are within our knowledge. So also are the circumstances connected with the death of young Cadogan West. Let me advise you to gain at least the small credit for repentance and confession, since there are still some details which we can only learn from your lips."

The man groaned and sank his face in his hands. We waited, but he was silent.

"I can assure you," said Holmes, "that every essential is already known. We know that you were pressed for money; that you took an impress of the keys which your brother held; and that you entered

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into a correspondence with Oberstein, who answered your letters through the advertisement columns of the *Daily Telegraph*. We are aware that you went down to the office in the fog on Monday night, but that you were seen and followed by young Cadogan West, who had probably some previous reason to suspect you. He saw your theft, but could not give the alarm, as it was just possible that you were taking the papers to your brother in London. Leaving all his private concerns, like the good citizen that he was, he followed you closely in the fog, and kept at your heels until you reached this very house. There he intervened, and then it was, Colonel Walter, that to treason you added the more terrible crime of murder."

"I did not! I did not! Before God I swear that I did not!" cried our wretched prisoner.

"Tell us then how Cadogan West met his end before you laid him upon the roof of a railway carriage."

"I will. I swear to you that I will. I did the rest. I confess it. It was just as you say. A Stock Exchange debt had to be paid. I needed the money badly. Oberstein offered me five thousand. It was to save myself from ruin. But as to murder, I am as innocent as you."

"What happened then?"

"He had his suspicions before, and he followed me as you describe. I never knew it until I was at the very door. It was thick fog, and one could not see three yards. I had given two taps and Oberstein had come to the door. The young man rushed up and demanded to know what we were about to do with the papers. Oberstein had a short life-preserver. He always carried it with him. As West forced his way after us into the house Oberstein struck him on the head. The blow was a fatal one. He was dead within five minutes. There he lay in the hall, and we were at our wits' end what to do. Then Oberstein had this idea about the trains which halted under his back window. But first he examined the papers which I had brought. He said that three of them were essential, and that he must keep them. 'You cannot keep them,' said I. 'There will be a dreadful row at Woolwich if they are not returned.' 'I must keep them,' said he, 'for they are so technical that it is impossible in the time to make copies.' 'Then they must all go back together to-night,' said I. He thought

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for a little, and then he cried out that he had it. 'Three I will keep,' said he. 'The others we will stuff into the pocket of this young man. When he is found the whole business will assuredly be put to his account.' I could see no other way out of it, so we did as he suggested. We waited half an hour at the window before a train stopped. It was so thick that nothing could be seen, and we had no difficulty in lowering West's body on to the train. That was the end of the matter so far as I was concerned."

"And your brother?"

"He said nothing, but he had caught me once with his keys, and I think that he suspected. I read in his eyes that he suspected. As you know, he never held up his head again."

There was silence in the room. It was broken by Mycroft Holmes.

"Can you not make reparation? It would ease your conscience, and possibly your punishment."

"What reparation can I make?"

"Where is Oberstein with the papers?"

"I do not know."

"Did he give you no address?"

"He said that letters to the Hotel de Louvre, Paris, would eventually reach him."

"Then reparation is still within your power," said Sherlock Holmes.

"I will do anything I can. I owe this fellow no particular good-will. He has been my ruin and my downfall."

"Here are paper and pen. Sit at this desk and write to my dictation. Direct the envelope to the address given. That is right. Now the letter:

'Dear Sir,—With regard to our transaction, you will no doubt have observed by now that one essential detail is missing. I have a tracing which will make it complete. This has involved me in extra trouble, however, and I must ask you for a further advance of five hundred pounds. I will not trust it to the post, nor will I take anything but gold or notes. I would come to you abroad, but it would excite remark if I left the country at present. Therefore I shall expect to meet you in the smoking-room of the Charing Cross Hotel at noon



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on Saturday. Remember that only English notes, or gold, will be taken.'

"That will do very well. I shall be very much surprised if it does not fetch our man."

And it did! It is a matter of history—that secret history of a nation which is often so much more intimate and interesting than its public chronicles—that Oberstein, eager to complete the coup of his life-time, came to the lure and was safely engulfed for fifteen years in a British prison. In his trunk were found the invaluable Bruce Partington plans, which he had put up for auction in all the naval centres of Europe.

Colonel Walter died in prison towards the end of the second year of his sentence. As to Holmes, he returned refreshed to his monograph upon the Polyphonic Motets of Lassus, which has since been printed for private circulation, and is said by experts to be the last word upon the subject. Some weeks afterwards I learned incidentally that my friend spent a day at Windsor, whence he returned with a remarkably fine emerald tie-pin. When I asked him if he had bought it, he answered that it was a present from a certain gracious lady in whose interests he had once been fortunate enough to carry out a small commission. He said no more; but I fancy that I could guess at that lady's august name, and I have little doubt that the emerald pin will for ever recall to my friend's memory the adventure of the Bruce-Partington plans.

## JOHN BUCHAN

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### *Dr. Lartius*

In the early spring Palliser-Yeates had 'flu, and had it so badly that he was sent to recruit for a fortnight on the Riviera. There, being profoundly bored, he wrote out and sent to us this story. He would not give the name of the chief figure, because he said he was still a serving soldier, and his usefulness, he hoped, was not exhausted. The manuscript arrived opportunely, for some of us had just been trying, without success, to extract from Sandy Arbuthnot the truth of certain of his doings about which rumour had been busy.

#### I

In the second week of January 1917, a modest brass plate appeared on a certain door in Regent Street, among modistes and hat-makers and vendors of cosmetics. It bore the name of Dr. S. Lartius. On the third floor were the rooms to which the plate was the signpost, a pleasant set, newly decorated with powder-blue wallpapers, curtains of orange velveteen, and sham marqueterie. The milliners' girls who frequented that staircase might have observed, about eleven in the morning, the figure of Dr. Lartius arriving. They did not see him leave, for they had flown to their suburban homes long before the key turned of an evening in the doctor's door.

He was a slim young man of the middle height, who held himself straighter than the usual run of sedentary folk. His face was very pale, and his mop of hair and fluffy beard were black as jet. He wore large tortoise-shell spectacles, and, when he removed them, revealed slightly protuberant and very bright hazel eyes, which contrasted oddly with his pallor. Had such a figure appeared on the stage, the gallery experts, familiar with stage villains, would have

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unhesitatingly set him down as the anarchist from Moscow about to assassinate the oppressive nobleman and thereby give the hero his chance. But his clothes were far too good for that part. He wore a shiny top-hat and an expensive fur coat, and his neat morning coat, fine linen, unobtrusive black tie, and pearl pin suggested the high finance rather than the backstairs of revolution.

It appeared that Dr. Lartius did a flourishing business. Suddenly London had begun to talk about him. First there were the people that matter, the people who are ever on the hunt for a new sensation and must always be in the first flight of any fad. Lady A. told the Duchess of B. about a wonderful new man who really had Power—no ordinary vulgar spiritualist, but a true Seeker and Thinker. Mr. D., that elderly gossip, carried the story through many circles, and it grew with the telling. The curious began to cultivate Dr. Lartius, and soon the fame of him came to the ears of those who were not curious, only anxious or broken-hearted; and because the last were a great multitude, and were ready to give their all for consolation, there was a busy coming and going on Dr. Lartius's staircase.

His way with his clients was interesting. He had no single method of treatment, and varied his manner according to the motives of the inquirer. The merely inquisitive he entertained with toys. "I am no professor of an art," he told them laughingly. "I am a student, groping on the skirts of great mysteries." And to the more intelligent he would propound an illustration. "Take the mathematics of the Fourth Dimension," he would say. "I can show you a few simple mechanical puzzles, which cannot be explained except by the aid of abstruse mathematics, and not always then. But these puzzles tell you nothing about the Fourth Dimension, except that there is a world about us inexplicable on the rule of three dimensions. It is the same with my toys—my crystal ball, my pool of ink, my star-maps, even those superinduced moods of abstraction in which we seem to hear the noise of wings and strange voices. They only tell me that there is more in earth and heaven than is dreamed of in man's philosophy."

But his toys were wonderful. The idle ladies who went there for a thrill were not disappointed. In the dusky rooms, among the strange rosy lights, their hearts seemed to be always fluttering on the brink

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of a revelation, and they came away excited and comforted, for Dr. Lartius was an adept at delicate flattery. Fortune-telling in the ordinary sense there was none, but this young man seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of private affairs, which he used so discreetly that even those who had most reason to desire secrecy were never disquieted. For such entertainments he charged fees—high fees, as the fur coat and the pearl pin required. “You wish to be amused,” he would say, “and it is right that you should pay me for it.”

Even among the idle clients there was a sprinkling of the earnest. With these he had the air of a master towards initiates; they were fellow-pilgrims with him on the Great Road. He would talk to them by the hour, very beautifully, in a soft musical voice. He would warn them against charlatans, those who sought to prostitute a solemn ritual to purposes of vulgar gain. He would unroll for them the history of the great mystics and tell of that secret science known to the old adepts, which had been lost for ages, and was now being recovered piecemeal. These were the most thrilling hours of all, and the fame of Dr. Lartius grew great in the drawing-rooms of the Elect. “And he’s such a gentleman, my dear—so well-bred and sympathetic and unworldly and absolutely honest!”

But from others he took no fees. The sad-faced women, mostly in black, who sat in his great velvet chair and asked broken questions, found a very different Dr. Lartius. He was no longer fluent and silver-tongued; sometimes he seemed almost embarrassed. He would repeat most earnestly that he was only a disciple, a seeker, not a master of hidden things. On such occasions the toys were absent, and if some distracted mother sought knowledge that way she was refused. He rarely had anything definite to impart. When Lady H.’s only son was about to exchange from the cavalry to the Foot Guards and his mother wanted to know how the step would affect his chances of survival, she got nothing beyond the obvious remark that this was an infantry war and he would have a better prospect of seeing fighting. Very rarely, he spoke out. Once to Mrs. K., whose boy was a prisoner, he gave a full account of life in a German prison-camp, so that, in the absence of letters, her imagination had henceforth something to bite on. Usually his visitors were too embarrassed to be observant, but one or two noted that he was uncommonly well

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informed about the British Army. He never made a mistake about units, and seemed to know a man's battalion before he was told it. And when mothers poured out details to him—for from the talk of soldiers on leave and epistolary indiscretion a good deal of information circulated about London—he now and then took notes.

Yet, though they got little from him that was explicit, these visitors, as a rule, went away comforted. Perhaps it was his gentle soothing manner. Perhaps, as poor Lady M. said, it was that he seemed so assured of the spiritual life that they felt that their anxieties were only tiny eddies on the edge of a great sea of peace. At any rate, it was the afflicted even more than the idly curious who spoke well of Dr. Lartius.

Sometimes he had masculine clients—fathers of fighting sons, who said they came on their wives' behalf, elderly retired Generals who preferred spiritualism to golf, boys whose nerves were in tatters and wanted the solace which in other ages and lands would have been found in the confessional. With these last Dr. Lartius became a new man. He would take off his spectacles and look them in the face with his prominent lustrous eyes, and talk to them with a ring in his pleasant voice. It was not what he said so much, perhaps, as his manner of saying it, but he seemed to have a singular power over boys just a little bit loose from their moorings. "Queer thing," said one of these, "but one would almost think you had been a soldier yourself." Dr. Lartius had smiled and resumed his spectacles. "I am a soldier, but in a different war. I fight with the sword of the spirit against the hidden things of darkness."

Towards the end of March the brass plate suddenly disappeared. There was a great fluttering in the dovecotes of the Elect when the news went round that there had been trouble with the police. It had been over the toys, of course, and the taking of fees. The matter never came into court, but Dr. Lartius had been warned to clear out, and he obeyed. Many ladies wrote indignant letters to the Home Secretary about persecution, letters which cited ominous precedents from the early history of the Christian Church.

But in April came consolation. The rumour spread that the Seekers were not to lose their guide. Mr. Greatheart would still be available for the comforting of pilgrims. A plate with the name of

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Dr. S. Lartius reappeared in a quiet street in Mayfair. But for the future there would be no question of fees. It was generally assumed that a few devout women had provided a fund for the sustenance of the prophet.

In May his fame was greater than ever. One evening Lady Samplar, the most ardent of his devotees, spoke of him to a certain General who was a power in the land. The General was popular among the women of her set, but a notorious scoffer. Perhaps this was the secret of his popularity, for each hoped to convert him.

"I want you to see him yourself," she said. "Only once. I believe in him so firmly that I am willing to stake everything on one interview. Promise me you will let me take you. I only want you to see him and talk to him for ten minutes. I want you to realize his unique personality, for if you once *feel* him you will scoff no more."

The General laughed, shrugged his shoulders, but allowed himself to be persuaded. So it came about that one afternoon in early June he accompanied Lady Samplar to the flat in Mayfair. "You must go in alone," she told him in the ante-room. "I have spoken about you to him, and he is expecting you. I will wait for you here."

For half an hour the General was closeted with Dr. Lartius. When he returned to the lady his face was red and wrathful.

"That's the most dangerous fellow in London," he declared. "Look here, Mollie, you and your friends have been playing the fool about that man. He's a German spy, if there ever was one. I caught him out, for I trapped him into speaking German. You say he's a Swiss, but I swear no Swiss ever spoke German just as he speaks it. The man's a Bavarian. I'll take my oath he is!"

It was a very depressed and rather frightened lady who gave him tea a little later in her drawing-room.

"That kind of sweep is far too clever for you innocents," she was told. "There he has been for months pumping you all without your guessing it. You say he's a great comfort to the mourners. I daresay he is, but the poor devils tell him everything that's in their heads. That man has a unique chance of knowing the inside of the British Army. And how has he used his knowledge? That's what I want to know."

"What are you going to do about it?" she quavered.

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"I'm going to have him laid by the heels," he said grimly, as he took his departure. "Interned—or put up against a wall, if we can get the evidence. I tell you he's a Boche pure and simple—not that there's much purity and simplicity about him."

The General was as good as his word, but in one matter he was wrong. The credentials of the prophet's Swiss nationality were good enough. There was nothing for it but to deport him as an undesirable, so one fine morning Dr. S. Lartius got his marching orders. He made no complaint, and took a dignified farewell of his friends. But the Faithful were not silent, and the friendship between Lady Samplar and the General died a violent death. The thing got into the papers. Dr. Lartius figured in many unrecognizable portraits in the press, and a bishop preached a sermon in a City church about the worship of false gods.

## II

As Dr. Lartius, closely supervised by the French police, pursued his slow and comfortless journey to the Swiss frontier, he was cheered by several proofs that his fame had gone abroad and that he was not forgotten. At Paris there were flowers in his dingy hotel bedroom, the gift of an unknown admirer, and a little note of encouragement in odd French. At Dijon he received from a strange lady another note telling him that his friends were awaiting him in Berne. When he crossed the border at Pontarlier there were more flowers and letters. The young man paid little attention to such tributes. He spent the journey in quiet reading and meditation, and when he reached Berne did not seem to expect anyone to greet him, and collected his luggage and drove off unobtrusively to an hotel.

He had not been there an hour when a card was brought to him bearing the name of Ernst Ulrici, Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Bonn.

"Dr. Lartius," said the visitor, a middle-aged man with a peaked grey beard and hair cut *en brosse*. "It is an honour to make your acquaintance. We have heard of your fine work and your world-moulding discoveries."

The young man bowed gravely. "I am only a seeker," he said.

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"I make no claim to be a master—yet. I am only a little way on the road to enlightenment."

"We have also heard," said the other, "of how shamelessly the British Government has persecuted learning in your person."

The reply was a smile and a shrug. "I make no complaint. It is natural that my studies should seem foolishness to the children of this world."

Dr. Ulrici pressed him further on the matter of Britain, but could wake no bitterness.

"There is war to-day," he said at last. "You are of German race. Your sympathies are with us?"

"I have no nationality," was the answer. "All men are my brothers. But I would fain see this bloodshed at an end."

"How will it end?" came the question.

"I am no prophet," said Dr. Lartius. "Yet I can tell that Germany will win, but how I can tell I cannot tell."

The conversation lasted long and explored many subjects. The German led it cunningly to small matters, and showed a wide acquaintance with the young man's science. He learned that much of his work had been done with soldiers and soldiers' kin, and that in the process of it he had heard many things not published in the newspapers. But when he hinted, ever so delicately, that he would be glad to buy the knowledge, a flush passed over the other's pale face and his voice sharpened.

"I am no spy," he said. "I do not prostitute my art for hire. It matters nothing to me which side wins, but it matters much that I keep my soul clean."

So Dr. Ulrici tried another tack. He spoke of the mysteries of the craft, and lured the young man into the confession of hopes and ideals. There could be no communion with the dead, he was told, until communion had first been perfected with the spirits of the living. "Let the time come," said Dr. Lartius, "when an unbroken fellowship can be created between souls separated by great tracts of space, and the key has been found. Death is an irrelevant accident. The spirit is untouched by it. Find the *trait d'union* between spirits still in their fleshly envelope, and it can be continued when that envelope is shed."



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"And you have progressed in this affair?" asked Ulrici, with scepticism in his tone.

"A few stages," said the other, and in the ardour of exposition he gave proofs. He had clients, he said, with whom he had established the mystic *catena*. He could read their thoughts even now, though they were far away, share in their mental changes, absorb the knowledge which they acquired.

"Soldiers?" asked the German.

"Some are soldiers. All are the kin of soldiers."

But Ulrici was still cold. "This is a great marvel," he said, "and not easy to believe."

Dr. Lartius was fired. "I will give you proofs," he said, with unwonted passion in his voice. "You can test them at your leisure. I know things which have not yet come to pass, though no man has spoken to me of them. How do I know them? Because they have come within the cognizance of minds attuned to my own."

For a moment he seemed to hesitate. Then he spoke of certain matters—a little change in the method of artillery barrages, a readjustment in the organization of the British Air Force, an alteration in certain British commands.

"These may be trivial things," he said. "I do not know. I have no technical skill. But they are still in the future. I offer them to you as proofs of my knowledge."

"So?" said the other. "They are indeed small things, but they will do for a test. . . ."

Then he spoke kindly, considerately, of Dr. Lartius's future.

"I think I will go to Munich," said the young man. "Once I studied at the University there, and I love the bright city. They are a sympathetic people and respect knowledge."

Dr. Ulrici rose to take his leave. "It may be I am able to further your plans, my friend," he said.

Late that night in a big sitting-room in another hotel, furnished somewhat in the style of an official bureau, Ulrici talked earnestly with another man, a heavy, bearded man, who wore the air of a prosperous bagman, but who was addressed with every token of respect.

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"This Lartius fellow puzzles me. He is a transparent fanatic, with some odd power in him that sets him above others of his kidney. I fear he will not be as useful to us as we had hoped. If only we had known of him sooner and could have kept him in England."

"He can't go back, I suppose?"

"Impossible, sir. But there is still a chance. He has some wild theory that he has established a link with various people, and so acquires automatically whatever new knowledge they gain. Some of these people are soldiers. He has told me things—little things—that I may test this power of his. I am no believer in the spiritualist mumbo-jumbo, but I have lived long enough not to reject a thing because it is new and strange. About that we shall see. If there is anything in it there will be much. Meantime I keep closely in touch with him."

"What is he going to do?"

"He wants to go to Munich. I am in favour of permitting it, sir. Our good Bavarians are somewhat light in the head, and are always seeking a new thing. They want a little ghostly consolation at present, and this man will give it them. He believes most firmly in our German victory."

The other yawned and flung away the end of his cigar. "The mountebank seems to have some glimmerings of sense," he said.

### III

So it came about that in August of the year 1917 Dr. Lartius was settled in comfortable rooms off the Garmischstrasse in the Bavarian capital, and a new plate of gun-metal and oxidised silver, lettered in the best style of *art nouveau*, advertised his name to the citizens of Munich.

Fortune still attended the young man, for, as in London, he seemed to spring at once into fame. Within a week of his arrival people were talking about him, and in a month his chambers were crowded. Perhaps his friend Ulrici had spoken a word in the right place. It was the great season before Caporetto, and Dr. Lartius spoke heartening things to his clients. Victory was near and the days of glory;

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but when asked about the date of peace he was coy. Peace would come, but not yet; for the world there was another winter of war.

His methods were the same as those which had captured Lady Samplar and her friends. To the idly curious he showed toys; to the emotional he spoke nobly of the life of the spirit and the locked doors of hidden knowledge which were now almost ajar. Rich ladies, bored with the dullness of the opera season and the scarcity of men, found in him a new interest in life. To the sorrowful he gave the comfort which he had given to his London circle—no more. His personality seemed to exhale hope and sympathy, and mourners, remembering his pleasant voice and compelling eyes, departed with a consolation which they could not define.

That was for the ordinary run of clients; but there were others—fellow-students they professed themselves—to whom he gave stronger meat. He preached his doctrine of the mystic community of thought and knowledge between souls far apart, and now and then he gave proofs such as he had given to Ulrici. It would appear that these proofs stood the test, for his reputation grew prodigiously. He told them little things about forthcoming changes in the Allied armies, and the event always proved him right. They were not things that mattered greatly; but if he could disclose trivialities, some day his method might enable him to reveal a mighty secret. So more than one *General-stabschef* came to sit with him in his twilit room.

About once a month he used to go back to Berne, and was invariably met at the station by Ulrici. He had been given a very special passport, which took him easily and expeditiously over the frontier, and he had no trouble with station commandants. In these visits he would be closeted with Ulrici for hours. Occasionally he would slip out of his hotel at night for a little, and when Ulrici heard of it he shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "He is young," he would say with a leer. "Even a prophet must have his amusements." But he was wrong, for Dr. Lartius had not the foibles he suspected.

The winter passed slowly, and the faces in the Munich streets grew daily more pinched and wan, clothing more shabby, and boots more down at heel. But there was always comfort for seekers in the room at the Garmischstrasse. Whoever lost faith, it was not Dr. Lartius. Peace was coming, and his hearers judged that he had

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forgotten his scientific detachment from all patriotisms and was becoming a good German.

Then in February of the New Year came the rumour of the great advance preparing in the West. The High Command had promised speedy and final victory in return for a little more endurance. Dr. Lartius seemed to have the first news of it. "It is Peace," he said, "Peace before winter"; and his phrase was repeated everywhere and became a popular watchword. So, when the news came at the end of March of the retreat of the French and English to the gates of Amiens, the hungry people smiled to each other and said, "He is right, as always. It is Peace." Few now cared much about victory, except the high officers and the very rich, but on Peace all were determined.

April passed into May, and ere the month was out came glorious tidings. Ludendorff had reached the Marne, and was within range of Paris. About this time his closest disciples marked a change in Dr. Lartius. He seemed to retire into himself, and to be struggling with some vast revelation. His language was less intelligible, but far more impressive. Ulrici came up from Berne to see him, for he had stopped for some months his visits to Switzerland. There were those who said his health was breaking, others that he was now, in very truth, looking inside the veil. This latter was the general view, and the fame of the young man became a superstition.

"You tell us little now about our enemies," Ulrici complained.

"*Mystica catena rupta est*," Dr. Lartius quoted sadly. "My friends are your enemies, and they are suffering. Their hearts and nerves are breaking. Therefore the link is thin and I cannot feel their thoughts. That is why I am so sad, for against my will the sorrow of my friends clouds me."

Ulrici laughed in his gross way. "Then the best omen for us is that you fall into melancholia? When you cut your throat we shall know that we have won."

Yet Ulrici was not quite happy. The young prophet was in danger of becoming a Frankenstein's monster, which he could not control. For his popular fame was now a thing to marvel at. It had gone abroad through Germany, and to all the fighting fronts, and the phrase linked to it was that of "Peace before winter." Peace

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had become a conviction, an obsession. Ulrici and his friends would have preferred the word to be "Victory."

In the early days of July a distinguished visitor came from Berlin to the Garmischstrasse. He was an *Erster Generalstabsoffizier*, high in the confidence of the Supreme Command. He sat in the shaded room and asked an urgent question.

"I am not a Delphian oracle," said Dr. Lartius, "and I do not prophesy. But this much I can tell you. The hearts of your enemies have become like water, and they have few reserves left. I am not a soldier, so you can judge better than I. You say you are ready to strike with a crushing force. If you leave your enemies leisure they will increase and their hearts may recover."

"That is my view," said the soldier. "You have done much for the German people in the past, sir. Have you no word now to encourage them?"

"There will be peace before winter. This much I can tell, but how I know I cannot tell."

"But on what terms?"

"That depends upon your armies," was the oracular reply.

The staff officer had been gazing intently at the speaker. Now he rose and switched on the electric light.

"Will you oblige me by taking off your glasses, sir?" he asked, and there was the sharpness of command in his voice.

Dr. Lartius removed his spectacles, and for some seconds the two men looked at each other.

"I thank you," said the soldier at last. "For a moment I thought we had met before. You reminded me of a man I knew long ago. I was mistaken."

After that it was noted by all that the melancholy of Dr. Lartius increased. His voice was saddened, and dejection wrapped him like a cloud. Those of the inner circle affected to see in this a good omen. "He is *en rapport* with his English friends," they said. "He cannot help himself, and their despair is revealed in him. The poor Lartius! He is suffering for the sins of our enemies." But the great public saw only the depression, and as August matured, and bad news filtered through the land, it gave their spirits an extra push downhill.

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In those weeks only one word came from the Garmischstrasse. It was "Peace—peace before winter." The phrase became the universal formula whispered wherever people spoke their minds. It ran like lightning through the camps and along the fronts, and in every workshop and tavern. It became a passion, a battle-cry. The Wise Doctor of Munich had said it. Peace before winter—Peace at all costs—only Peace.

In September Ulrici was in communication with a certain bureau in Berlin. "The man is honest enough, but he is mad. He has served his purpose. It is time to suppress him." Berlin agreed, and one morning Ulrici departed from Berne.

But when he reached the Garmischstrasse he found the flamboyant plate unscrewed from the door and the pleasant rooms deserted.

For a day or two before Dr. Lartius had been behaving oddly. He gave out that he was ill, and could not receive; but he was very busy indoors with his papers. Then late one evening, after a conversation on the telephone with the railway people, he left his rooms, with no luggage but a small dressing-case, and took the night train for Innsbruck. His admirable passport franked him anywhere. From Innsbruck he travelled to the Swiss frontier, and when he crossed it, in the darkness of the September evening and in an empty carriage, he made a toilet which included the shaving of his silky black beard. He was whistling softly and seemed to have recovered his spirits. At Berne he did not seek his usual hotel, but went to an unfrequented place in a back street, where, apparently, he was well known. There he met during the course of the day various people, and their conversation was not in the German tongue.

That night he again took train, but it was westward to Lausanne and the French border.

## IV

In the early days of November, when the Allies were approaching Maubeuge and Sedan, and the German plenipotentiaries were trying to dodge the barrage and get speech with Foch, two British officers were sitting in a little room at Versailles. One was the General we

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have already met, the quondam friend of Lady Samplar. The other was a slim young man who wore the badges of a lieutenant-colonel and the gorget patches of the staff. He had a pale face shaven clean, black hair cut very short, and curious, bright, protuberant hazel eyes. He must have seen some service, for he had two rows of medal ribbons on his breast.

"Unarm, Eros," quoted the General, looking at the last slip on a pile of telegrams. "'The long day's task is done.' It has been a grim business, and, Tommy, my lad, I think you had the most difficult patch of the lot to hoe. . . . It was largely due to you that the Boche made his blunder on 15th July, and stretched his neck far enough to let Foch hit him."

The young man grinned. "I wouldn't like to go through it again, sir. But it didn't seem so bad when I was at it, though it is horrible to look back on. The worst part was the loneliness."

"You must have often had bad moments."

"Not so many. I only remember two as particularly gruesome. One was when I heard you slanging me to Lady Samplar, and I suddenly felt hopelessly cut off from my kind. . . . The other was in July, when von Mudra came down from Berlin to see me. He dashed nearly spotted me, for he was at the Embassy when I was in Constantinople."

The General lifted a flamboyant plate whereon the name of Dr. S. Lartius was inscribed in letters of oxidised silver. "You've brought away your souvenir all right. I suppose you'll have it framed as a trophy for your ancestral hall. By the way, what did the letter S stand for?"

"When I was asked," said the young man, "I said 'Sigismund.' But I really meant it for 'Spurius'—the chap, you remember, who held the bridge with Horatius."

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### *The Hut*

There was a matter which they did not at first discuss, those two; for it was not until repeated doses of gin had deadened sensitivity that they were able to look each other in the eyes without uneasiness. Meanwhile their store of common memories, past misadventures that were always good for a laugh whenever two ex-security officers met, were rich enough to support unthinking conversation. Their enigmatic trade had been far fuller of the comic than of inhumanity. It was their job to suspect, but they were thankful when—with perhaps one yearly grim exception—their suspicions were proved lamentably wrong.

"Fayze was a bastard," said the older man suddenly.

"He was. But I can't say he bothers me at this distance."

Virian meant to say "*it* bothers," but couldn't quite manage the word. The other, however, understood him.

"No. Nor me. But it did. Spoilt my sleep for a bit. I don't mind saying so now. How did you—well, get on afterwards?"

"Sat on it," answered Virian noncommittally.

He was obviously a man with a fine tradition of mental discipline behind him. His thin, dark face was mellow, and implied that he drew his strength from knowledge of human limitations and acceptance of human tragedy. He might have been twenty-five or so at the beginning of the war, that far-off period of which the two were talking, and a promising officer—a shade indecisive, perhaps, but slow to blame and much beloved by his men.

Medlock, the older man, was of a more plebeian type, with no more moulding about his face than the accidental contours of a chunk of rock. The hammer of fate could smash him into smaller pieces than Virian, and he knew it. He was contented, however, to be as he



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was, and hadn't much use for complications. He was convinced—or once had been—of his own essential decency.

"I didn't like it," he muttered. "Didn't like it at all. I'd been a regular sergeant-major and just got my commission, you see."

"That was why you didn't protest?" Virian asked.

"What about yourself?" Medlock retorted, catching the irony. "And why didn't *you*?"

"Oh, obedience," answered the other easily. "As an amateur soldier I felt I had to do what I was told. It's a bit hard to analyse. The enemy outclassed us in skill and material. Well, all that was left in which we could equal him was an obstinate Teutonic obedience. His not to reason why, his but to do and die. A good many of us felt like that. You, as an old soldier, were far too sensible to find romance in mere obedience any longer."

"Hell of a thing to do," grumbled the ex-sergeant-major. "Order us to go out and shoot a civilian!"

"They only asked us to see that he *was* shot," Virian corrected him.

"Wouldn't do you much good to tell that to the judge! We were present at a murder. Accessories. You get hung just the same."

They began to go through the happenings of that day all over again, proper old soldiers (or old murderers) recalling every foot of the terrain, every hour of agony and disapproval since they had emerged from Colonel Fayze's secretive office with set faces and a feeling that their integrity, their little personal shares in Christendom and civilization, had been outraged.

The newly-commissioned sergeant-major had been the more horrified of the two. He was accustomed to see his instructions in black and white before he paid serious attention to them. War had to be orderly, and not for nothing was his temple called the orderly room. He claimed now, ten years later, that he had been on the verge of refusal, that he hadn't seen any necessity for violence at all.

"You did. You saw it," Virian insisted. "Don't make things worse for your conscience than they need be. It had to be done. What was the name of that fat crook we bumped off?"

"God, you don't have to put it like that!"

"But what the devil *was* his name?"

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"I don't remember," Medlock answered impatiently.

"Nor do I. Revealing, isn't it? Gallant memory, always in the breach, always protecting us from night starvation! Well, it was some very common French name, so let's call him M. Dupont.

"Dupont had betrayed—and don't you forget *that!*—a whole honeycomb of French resistance cells. As a direct result, the Gestapo shot twenty-seven men and women, and sent Dupont to Spain for his own safety. Fayze's organization kidnapped him there, and brought him to England in a submarine chaser. You knew that. And then they dressed him up in uniform and put him in a military prison as if he were an Allied soldier being held for suspected espionage.

"All very neat work! Secret-service stuff right out of the books! But Fayze and the fool who did his dirty jobs in Spain hadn't worked out what was to happen next. They couldn't bring Dupont to trial because he hadn't committed any offence under English law. And they couldn't intern him because at that period in the war there wasn't any quiet spot where no questions at all were asked. So they had to get rid of him, and persuade the Free French to do the shooting. I don't wonder you forget why Dupont's death was necessary. He was a sacrifice to inefficiency. But inefficiency is a much more potent factor in war than logic."

"Do you remember that dam' tough with the blood on his boots whom they sent with us?" asked Medlock with a movement of the shoulders that had been turned from a shiver into a shrug.

"The dam' tough had been the only man in the party who really looked as if he had been employed on this sort of mission before. A mysterious commando lad. At least they supposed he was commando, or from someone's private army—though he wore a gunner's badges on his neat, new battledress. He never said a word about himself, and asked no questions. The uniform, which lacked the individuality given by daily use, made it difficult to guess what he had been in civil life. He had a simple, unimaginative face, knocked about a bit by boxing or some other violent exercise, and it was firmly set to the job in hand. Virian and Medlock had been glad that they were accompanied by an apparent professional to whom as much as possible might be left.

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They knew him only by the assumed name of Smith, and it was he who drove the car—a big, black saloon with two extra seats in the back. There were five of them altogether in the car when they went to fetch M. Dupont: Virian, Medlock and two Free French. One of the Frenchmen, who was the—well, it was understood that he had a personal score to settle with M. Dupont—was a small, sad, determined man in civilian clothes; the other, in uniform, was very much an officer of the French regular army. He was of their own sort, keyed up to the inevitable sense of duty, and with distaste clearly mapped upon his humane and honourable countenance.

They drove to the prison. Medlock and Virian signed for the body of M. Dupont, who was officially being held as a doubtful Free French soldier until his antecedents could be investigated. Dupont had gladly accepted and lived up to this fiction. He was clever enough to realize that the longer he was kept, the harder it would be to dispose of him.

When he was in the car, Dupont's nerve began to fail. He asked Virian hesitatingly what their intentions were. They had the answer ready for that. Dupont must be reassured. If he were to put his head out of the window and yell for help, the law of England would automatically be on his side, war or no war. Keep him quiet till the end—those were Virian's and Medlock's orders.

Virian told M. Dupont that he was being handed over to his compatriots: that they were driving to a rendezvous out in open country where a Free French detachment would take charge of him. This made Dupont less apprehensive. He could have little doubt what his own countrymen would do to him sooner or later, but he was also very well aware that, being good Frenchmen, they would have to invent a show of legality—which would be difficult when they were guests in a country with a tender conscience. A formal handing over meant, for a time, reprieve.

M. Dupont sat on the back seat between Virian and the French major. Facing them, on one of the extra seats, was the sad, determined personage, looking determinedly out of the window. In front were Medlock and the uncommunicative Smith. Dupont and Virian kept up a polite and desultory conversation.

"Never been able to understand, I haven't," said Medlock, "how

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you could sit there chatting away. In French, too," he added, as if an assassin's proper language should be English.

"It was easier than sitting grim, and saying nothing," Virian explained. "And Dupont helped. He was a very civilized creature. He didn't like social embarrassment either. Good Lord, if I hadn't known his record, I should have put him down as just a bland, fat Frenchman! All for peace and decent living, he was. That was probably what made him take the Vichy side—that and money."

They drove away over the sweep of the Wiltshire downs in the direction of Bath. It was a golden day of late autumn, with just enough wind to ripple the massed spearheads of dying grass and to check the high hovering clouds from ever settling on the sun. M. Dupont, released from the discipline and scrubbing soap of a military prison, was enchanted, and lavished courteous praise upon the English countryside. It reminded him, he said, of Picardy.

Their destination was a disused mine-shaft with a tumble-down building above it. Colonel Fayze had given them the map reference, assuring them that Smith had visited the spot already and that the building was unlocked. Two of the planks which covered and completely hid the mouth of the shaft had been loosened, said Fayze with an obscene wink, and could be lifted out. He had shown pride—a legitimate pride from the point of view of his office chair—in the excellence of his arrangements. The disposal of Dupont on paper had had his personal attention.

After an hour's run, Smith stopped the car below the mine-shaft. Nothing was to be seen but an isolated hut of timber and corrugated iron, with a strong door from which the padlock had recently been wrenched loose; no derrick or abandoned machinery revealed the purpose of the building and the dark emptiness beneath the floor. Fayze had well chosen his theatre for the operation. There was no need for any bumping through country lanes into a suspicious remoteness, or for scrambling on foot through dense woods with a reluctant victim. The hut was within fifty yards of a main road. A carful of men could stop on the verge for a short while without arousing uneasiness in Dupont or other curious but less essentially interested travellers.

The only disadvantage was the frequent passing of traffic on the road which ran, level and clear, for a hundred yards past the hut

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and a little below it. At one end of the straight was a blind hill, and at the other a corner. To ensure privacy, both these points would have to be watched.

Dupont was left in the car with Smith, while the four others got out for consultation at a decent distance.

"If Medlock stays at the corner," said Virian, "and I go to the top of the hill, we shall be able to signal to you when the road is empty."

The French major appeared suddenly forlorn, his face that of a man who had known all along that he was an unreasoning optimist.

"I thought that you . . ." he began.

"No," Virian answered firmly. "My instructions are just to keep the ring. It was definitely understood that you . . ."

"I could not myself . . . my honour as an officer . . ."

"Naturally, *mon commandant*," Virian replied, and looked questioningly at the other, so sad and wirily small and determined.

"I have had my orders," that second Frenchman murmured, "to accord to M. Dupont the justice he has so richly merited. I shall obey. I beg you to believe that I do not say it with pleasure. But"—he sought their eyes with a simple honesty that, in the circumstances, was monstrous—"he is a heavy man, and I shall need some help."

"This Smith," Medlock suggested. "The colonel said he was to make himself useful."

True, Fayze had airily assured them that the mysterious driver was ready to do whatever he was told; but Virian was unwilling to force such responsibility upon any human being till there was some evidence of a real lack of sensitivity.

"I'll get hold of him and see what he says, if you'll stand by the car, Medlock, and keep an eye on Dupont."

He took Smith a little apart, and asked him what exactly his orders were.

"To assist you in every possible way, sir," Smith answered.

Virian was uneasy. There was a light in the young eyes which looked uncommonly like hero worship. Yet Smith's expression was tough and set. The very smoothness of the skin hid emotion more absolutely than the mobile lines of an older face.

"You understand, of course, just exactly what the job is?"

"I did the recce with the colonel," Smith assured him.

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He produced the word *reccy* with a certain pride, which suggested to Virian that he had not been long in the army. Well, God knew what some of these young commando chaps, quickly, violently trained, must have seen and done already!

"Then will you go up with that gentleman and the prisoner to the mine-shaft? He, of course, is going to—to take the necessary steps. And, look here, Smith, refuse if you want to! This is no part of your duty as a soldier."

"I understand that, sir."

There wasn't any shaking that firm professional. His attitude was so matter-of-fact that Virian began to doubt the value of his own scruples. He gave full credit to Fayze for choosing a murderer's mate whose cold-blooded morale was an example to them all.

They took Dupont out of the car. The polite smile with which he had brightened his formal conversation was fixed at half its full extent. He looked at them, his eyes searching each face in turn with the uneasy instinct of an animal at the shambles gate.

The French major reassured him with deliberate ambiguity.

"This is the rendezvous," he said. "It is here that you will shortly meet certain Free Frenchmen."

Dupont again anxiously reviewed the faces. What he saw relieved him—for their orders were to keep him quiet, and even their eyes were obedient. His smile returned to its natural mobility. Two big drops of sweat trickled down his fat cheeks, shaved to a piglike smoothness for the morning inspection of his person and his cell.

Smith, Dupont and the executioner walked up over the grass towards the hut. The French major remained by the car, torturing a cigarette between his fingers. Medlock went to the curve of the road; Virian to the top of the hill. So long as both held their hands in their pockets, the road was clear. When their hands were exposed, it was a sign that traffic was approaching. Smith stood by the door of the hut, relaying their gestures to the interior.

Virian could see quarter of a mile of empty road. He put his hands in his pockets, dismissing quickly a thought of Roman thumbs. On a distant slope was a small convoy moving down towards him, but the job would be over by the time it arrived.

Medlock, at his end, kept his hands very plainly in sight. A baker's

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van came round the corner, along the straight and up the hill past Virian—who now also revealed his hands, for the approaching convoy was too close. A motorcycle, a truck and six heavy lorries bumbled interminably past at regulation intervals and twenty miles an hour, adding to Dupont's store three more minutes of October noon.

Medlock put his hands in his pockets. Virian waited for a faraway car, and damned the wheels that flashed in the sunlight for not turning more slowly. They passed, and he found his hands playing noisily with the coins in one pocket and keys in the other. He waited for the shot. It didn't come. He was furiously angry. What were they doing inside the hut? After all this trouble! Why couldn't they get on?

Ten minutes went by with no movement on the road but the lumbering, swift shadow of a carrion crow impatient to return to his perch. Then Medlock's hands came out with a gesture as if he were flinging at the hut the contents of his pockets. An oldish man, instantly recognizable as a retired colonel or general, deprived—and no doubt uncomplainingly—of petrol, drove round the corner in a dogcart with his two little grand-daughters. He called in cheerful comradeship that it was a lovely day. Bitterly Virian put him down as a merciful and honourable man. He could afford those virtues in the simpler wars that he had known.

Again both ends of the road were clear for long minutes, and again there was no shot. Medlock came striding back from his corner, his face that of a sergeant-major who was about to tell his paraded and incompetent squad exactly what he thought of it. Virian, too, hastened back to the car in fear lest his companion should hurl some blunt protest or, worse still, some unfeeling denial of protest, into so delicate an occupation.

"Man doesn't know his job!" Medlock stormed.

"Would you expect him to?" retorted Virian.

The French major at the car turned on them, illogically angry as themselves. Some cutting irony at the expense of the English came beautifully shaped from his lips and died away as he became conscious of the brutal absurdity of any blame.

While they were staring at the hut, a melancholy procession came down the hill towards them—Dupont, Smith and the Frenchman,

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more sad than ever. Even Dupont looked disappointed. Very likely, he was. The Free French detachment, the larger public among which he would, for a little while, be safe, had not turned up.

Dupont was again left with Fayze's tame tough, while the other four went aside.

"Couldn't Smith relay the signals to you?" Virian asked.

"Yes," the French civilian replied. "Yes."

"Well, then? Well, then, for God's sake?" the major demanded.

"The hut is too small. I cannot get behind him. Perhaps he will not let me get behind him. And to draw the pistol before his eyes—no, I cannot do it."

"Well, we daren't hang about here any longer," said Virian. "Someone may get inquisitive, and start watching us. We had better drive off now and come back later."

The party packed into the car, still unexpectedly six. Dupont conversed with polite, tacit sympathy, identifying himself with the unknown derangement of plans which all had suffered. He behaved as if he were an embarrassing but useful prisoner—a double agent, for example, about to be sent off on some dangerous journey. He may even have persuaded himself that such a destiny was possible.

He addressed himself particularly to the French civilian, perhaps trying to allay his own suspicions. Dupont was a type to be successful, Virian decided, as minor businessman or major traitor, for he had an insistent cunning. He talked and talked, closely watching with eyes that held a decent pretence of geniality the impact of his words. The failure in the hut was very understandable. Dupont was tiresome; Dupont's fat face was that of a crook; but it was impossible to treat him with anything but courtesy. To draw a gun before his face was a task as awkward as to get him out of the office without giving him a small order.

Smith had been pale and self-controlled when he returned from the hut. He now returned to his puzzling and casehardened temperament. He asked sharply where he was to go.

Well, where? Just a drive. Out for a drive. A pleasant occupation for a family on Sunday afternoon. Such aimlessness was intolerable. An order had to be given, some destination found.



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"Oh, stop at the first pub when we're off the downs," Virian replied, his voice military and exasperated.

It was a considerable place, more of a roadhouse than a pub, which had no doubt been gay enough before the war with thirsty and fast-driving youth. Now, however, the long lounge was vacant and frustrated of purpose. Fireplace and imitation beams had been excitably decorated with paper flags and regimental badges. All this dust-laden patriotism, exposed to sunlight, had the depressing unreality of a night club on the morning after. Smith, Dupont and the Frenchman sat down at once, and together, as if bound by a hard, common experience, in a corner of the room.

"I won't drink with him," Medlock whispered. "God damn it, there are limits!"

Virian carried three drinks to Dupont's table, and himself remained with Medlock and the French major at the bar. For once he found himself in whole hearted sympathy with Medlock. A curious atavism, to refuse to drink with a man you were about to kill. He couldn't remember that there was any such law of hospitality in the Christian religion; it was wholly pagan—a rule of Viking hovel or Arab tent. Where the devil, he wondered, had he inherited it? And why should Medlock observe it, too?

The French major seemed also unwilling to join Dupont, either from the same scruples or because he was busy disassociating himself from the whole affair and its mismanagement. The three of them drifted through the door to a bench on the clean stone flags outside. After a while the other Frenchman joined them, confidently leaving Smith alone with Dupont.

"I must offer my excuses," he said. "I did not anticipate——"

Here, away from the victim, his character no longer appeared of any extraordinary determination. He admitted nothing (and one could hardly put the direct question) but plainly for him as for them this was a first experience.

"Look here!" Virian exclaimed, suddenly as compassionate for the civilian as for Dupont. "I am prepared to go back and report that this can't be done."

"But, alas, it must be done."

"Why? We can keep the blighter in prison for you. If they can't

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find a way of holding him, it's their business to think of one. What do you say, sir?" he asked the French major.

"Me? I have not the right to interfere. It is your service which took Dupont, and your service which has requested us to get rid of him. Sooner or later our duty as Frenchmen must be done, but I admit I should prefer it to be by due process of law."

So, even to him, there was no point in immediate punishment. There was a more complex, far more insistent motive for Dupont's death than mere justice. Fayze and his precious colleague in Spain were terrified lest their too impulsive act should become known to the enemy, with whom they had a rogues' agreement that kidnapping and assassination were barred. Such unsporting practices would have interfered with the daily game of collecting information. The end of all fun and promotion—like placing a bomb on a football field. Fayze didn't at all want his agents kidnapped by way of retaliation; so Dupont could never be allowed to mix with other internees, to appear on any list, to write a letter or answer a question. He had to vanish for good.

It was the uncleanness of this necessity which revolted Virian. For this, for the sake of what in the end was nothing but inefficiency, he and Medlock and young Smith—it was the youth of Smith which appalled him, whether or not the man was callous—were to be turned into murderers.

"What about our orders?" Medlock asked.

"Damn our orders! If we report that the thing is too risky, they must accept our opinion. I'm not saying that Dupont doesn't deserve to be shot. I'm saying that we can't take the responsibility."

"That is between you and your superiors," the French major remarked unhelpfully.

"And mercy—doesn't that come in?"

"One can have too many scruples," added the other Frenchman, his voice bitter with longing for the simplicities of peace.

He, at least, had no doubt that Dupont's sentence was just. He had become more deeply obsessed than they by the demands of war and civil war, so that in his eyes this killing served a spiritual purpose which transcended its vileness. It was only the incapacity of his own hand which tormented him.

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"Well, we've got them. So why not admit it? We hate this. We can't go on expecting you to do it, and looking the other way. We can't go on testing Smith to the breaking point by making him drink with Dupont just as if the man weren't a ghost come back from the grave. Why not admit that we do have scruples and take the brute back to prison?"

Virian let himself go. A limited and painful eloquence. It couldn't be for the defence, since his client—they all acknowledged it—was guilty; it couldn't even be for mitigation of sentence, since that sentence, though highly irregular, though the motives behind it stank to heaven, was just. No, it seemed to him in retrospect that he had preached the virtue of mercy in futile abstract, as any poet or parson.

"The defeated cannot afford mercy," cried the tortured executioner.

It was astonishing that a man could pronounce so neat and closed a phrase with such emotion. Evidently it was the profession of faith with which he comforted his soul—and unanswerable by citizens of a nation which did not for a moment believe itself to have been defeated.

Virian got up—it would do no harm to let the heaven of mercy work in his absence—and went into the lounge to look after Smith. His conscience was raw on every surface.

Smith was playing shove ha'penny with Dupont, like an old, experienced warder in the condemned cell.

"All right?" Virian asked. "How are your glasses?"

"Don't mind if we do, sir."

Virian went over to the bar and ordered two stiff gins. He beckoned to Smith to join him.

"Would you like to go outside for a breath of air?" he asked.

"I'm all right, sir," Smith answered, with a strong, impatient accent on the *right*.

With the impenetrable sternness of youth he carried the drinks away to his corner, and resumed his game with Dupont. Virian returned to the others, telling himself that he was the only man among them who was not fit to be a soldier.

The French civilian, with the quick sympathy of his race for

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emotion, put a friendly hand on the Englishman's shoulder and said:

"I cannot permit Dupont to live. The responsibility is mine."

"But what do you suggest?" Virian asked harshly. "Are we to go back to that damned mine-shaft?"

"No. Somewhere else, I beg you."

"I can't take you anywhere else. My superiors have worked this out very well. I'll say that for them at least."

"In the hut I cannot—arrange it."

"But that is only what I am saying," Virian insisted. "It can't be done—for the reason that it's humanly impossible for us."

"You would report that?" asked the French major.

"Certainly. Without hesitation."

"We should appear to be cowards."

Medlock gave a grunt of scorn. As an old professional soldier, he had no objection to appearing a coward so long as the situation called for cowardice. Only amateurs and Latins bothered about appearances.

"And who the hell cares?" he said.

"Alas, it must be done," repeated the civilian.

"But you've just said it can't be done." Virian almost shouted.

"I say the hut is too small," the other insisted. "You are slow. You wait for traffic. I wait for you. And then by that time Dupont is not where I want him. I say that I cannot"—and his voice, though it was low, vibrated with agony—"I cannot raise the pistol before his eyes."

It was the note which Virian had already heard, for a single instant, in Smith's voice also. Through the door he could see him still playing his forced and melancholy shove ha'penny with Dupont. The situation, futile and mismanaged, was intolerable to all of them. They were like children who had broken the back of an animal by brutal thoughtlessness and then were without courage to put it out of pain—and he himself the worst of them.

This couldn't go on. Mercy. No mercy. It can't be done. It must be done. That civilian and Smith had first call on any mercy. If this infirmity of purpose went on much longer, one of them would hysterically free Dupont, or take him out and shoot him before the eyes of some astonished farm labourer.

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"Damn Fayze! Damn his precautions!" he cried. "Listen! We get out of the car. You walk at once up to the hut with Dupont in front of you and Smith behind you. Medlock and I go to our posts on the road. We shall all arrive at about the same time. Unless there is traffic right on top of us, we shall give no signal. As soon as Dupont is over the threshold—do it! He'll have his back to you, and he will never know a thing."

The decision was instantly and gratefully accepted. Virian had fought for Dupont's life and Virian had condemned him to death. He himself was well aware of what he had done. Inconsistency be damned! If one couldn't have heaven, then hell was preferable to chaos.

"Well, Dupont," he said, breaking up the shove ha'penny game, "let's have another shot at it."

The sound of his own voice in that unfortunate phrase, which he had cheerfully pronounced without thinking, made him wince and turn away.

Dupont hoped politely that the luck would be better, ingratiating himself like a circus pig that had been trained to smile. He left the board, and took down his coat and hat. He had plainly decided that for this day at least he had nothing to fear. The drinks, the genial delay and the resolute acting of his companion had put him at ease.

Virian caught Smith's questioning eye behind Dupont's overcoat, and beckoned to him to remain behind for a moment.

"Same positions, but it will be done through the back of the neck the moment he steps into the hut. A few seconds, and all over."

Smith ran his tongue round his lips, and seemed about to speak. There was no longer any light of adventure in his sturdy, blue eyes; they had matured, as if searching deeply, far down beyond the presumed limit of his vision, into probable consequences.

"Yes? What is it?" Virian asked, trying to put into his smile the eagerness which he dared not show in his voice.

"O.K., sir," said Smith.

He drove the party back to the mine-shaft. The journey had the nightmare quality of life in reverse. Pub to lowland hedges, to grey villages under the downs, to clean sweep of hill turf, to the crest of the road and first glimpse of the hut—all the way back, inevitably, to the hated beginning that should have been left forever.

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The French civilian told Dupont to get out and walk up to the hut. He himself followed a pace or two behind, and Smith strolled purposefully after.

Medlock hurried to the curve of the road; Virian up the blind hill. There was a car approaching which would be on them in twenty seconds. He made no signal. That was time enough if all went smoothly.

He looked round. Dupont was just entering the door of the hut. He saw the Frenchman's pistol sweep up in a curve and cross the threshold alone, as if it were some tenuous body independent of those before and behind. The shot, too, was thin and strained. Louder and more final was the double thud of planks thrown back into place. When the car passed, Smith and the French civilian were already walking down the hill.

On the way home they all talked very heartily. Someone laughed, and there was a sudden silence. After that, they all laughed if there were reasonable excuse. Smith put his bravado into his driving. It was brutal. He didn't seem to care whether they ever reached London or not.

"God, he put the wind up me!" Medlock said to Virian, obsessed by his companion of ten years before. "And that blood on his boots——"

Smith hadn't noticed the blood. He had only heard it when he lifted Dupont's shoulders. They made him get out and wash it off in a stream.

"God, he was a tough, and no mistake!" Medlock persisted. "I don't mind telling you—he used to chase me around in my dreams."

"He said the same of you," Virian answered.

"Eh? What do you mean? What do you mean? I thought you didn't know him."

"I didn't, then. I looked him up later."

"What? Damned if I see how you could bear to be reminded!" Medlock barked at him. "If anyone had ever mentioned Dupont to me, I'd have dotted him one. And to look him up—God, I wonder where Fayze found him!"

"In one of his offices. Behind a typewriter."

"Smith? A clerk?"

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"Yes. Civilian clerk. Temporarily unfit for general service, and worshipping Fayze. Wanted of course to join the Great British Secret Service. Adventure, ha? *You* know. Fayze was very clever in a feminine sort of way. He spotted Smith's qualities all right. The boy was fascinated, so he used him. He told him that it was a trial trip, that if he had the nerve *to assist us in every way——*"

Medlock put down his drink, and retched.

"The bastard!" he shouted.

"Yes. I found out only just in time. When I turned up at his lodgings, he'd written a letter to his parents explaining why he was going to kill himself. It was all right when he could talk, when he realized that it hadn't exactly been a normal day's work for any of us. As soon as he could pass a medical, I got him away from Fayze. Into the army, where blood at any rate is clean. One didn't want so much self-discipline to be lost."

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## ***News out of Spain***

**"This is the young person, your Grace,"** said the major-domo, and with a gesture to Robin Aubrey: **"Stand forward, Guiseppe!"**

The old colossus who was bending his bald head over columns and columns of figures spread upon the table turned his chair and fixed his eyes upon the lad. They were remarkable eyes, big and black, very steady and searching, and quietly alarming. But the Marquis of Santa Cruz was an alarming man. Amongst the commanders of great fleets he had in that day the greatest name of all. And though he was now in his seventy-third year, his belly fallen, and his health gone, he had still the readiness and resource which had enabled him in earlier days to sail his ships into the gap in the line and save the day at Lepanto; and still the ruthlessness which made him put to the sword every prisoner taken in the rout of Strozzi's fleet at the Azores. Robin had as much ado to keep his knees from shaking as he had had long ago when his Queen called him out from among the Oppidans at Eton. It seemed to him that Santa Cruz was never going to take his eyes off him. "He is looking into my soul." Robin was sure of it. How could he hope to outface this old conqueror with all his experience of men? And Santa Cruz still looked at him. "He is stripping every rag of my disguise off me," Robin cried to himself; and then Santa Cruz spoke. He asked a bewildering question.

**"And did you move forward?"**

Robin could make neither head nor tail of it.

**"When Diego announced you?"** Santa Cruz continued impatiently.

**"I moved forward three paces."**

**"Move again! Stand in front of me!"**



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Robin's heart turned to water. But he moved forward, none the less, and stood respectfully before the Marquis.

"He's trying to frighten me," Robin reflected, and added, "Yes, but he's succeeding."

Santa Cruz growled in his throat, and Robin thought: "Another minute of this and I shall be on my knees confessing all. He can see that I've stained my skin."

But again Santa Cruz surprised him.

"Get my shoes! Take off my boots!"

A pair of light shoes was lying by the hearth. Robin fetched them. The Marquis was wearing brown boots of untanned leather which reached above his knees. Robin knelt in front of him, drew off the boots carefully and tenderly and slipped on the shoes. Then he stood up again.

"Guiseppe Marino?" the Marquis asked.

"Your Excellency, that is my name."

"An Italian?"

"Of Leghorn."

It was going to come now, Robin said to himself—the accusing finger, the one word "liar", and the dungeon at the bottom of the Tower afterwards. But a third surprise awaited him.

"Diego, you will explain to this boy his duties," and so the old man turned back to his figures, and Robin got himself out of the room as quickly as he could.

On the stair outside Diego turned Robin over to Giacomo Ferranti, who was waiting with a white face to hear how the interview had gone.

"I am hired," Robin explained, "and with few words. But what persuaded his Excellency, heaven knows."

Nor could Giacomo Ferranti help him to a better knowledge—nor any one indeed except Santa Cruz himself had he been so minded. For none but Santa Cruz knew in how desperate a sickness Santa Cruz was caught. The enterprise of England—if he could live to sail up the Channel and burn Elizabeth at St. Paul's Cross! That was all he asked. If he died now, would the enterprise ever be brought to its proper godly result? Medina-Sidonia, now in the south at Cadiz, was an ass, a reluctant, plodding, uninspired ass. Recalde, a good

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wary sailor of the puritanical kind, and a veteran like Santa Cruz himself was not the man for so vast an authority. Alonzo de Leyva, his own second-in-command here at Lisbon, was a cavalry officer and a hot-head. Miguel de Oquendo, who was fitting out the Guipuscoan squadron up at Passages, he Spain's Philip Sidney, was the only man with the spirit and the wisdom for so tremendous an undertaking: and his youth and a joyousness he found in living were not the qualities which would commend him to Philip. He himself, therefore, must live and hide his maladies as best he could from as many as he could, but most of all from himself.

There was the rub. He had to play the old man's game of pretending that he was young, else would Philip never be master of the world. But it was a difficult business and Guiseppe Marino was likely to help him.

"I who could sleep like the dead with sailors scouring the deck a foot above my head, am tormented if a heavy foot shakes the floor," he acknowledged in a rare moment of confession. "The jar of a rough hand, and I'm in pain. Mother of God, a vibration of the air and I'm jangled like an ill-tuned fiddle!"

Thus the light-footed Giuseppe, who could remove a boot so deftly that a swollen leg was not aware of it and yet lend the support of a shoulder of steel, became with every day more and more of a necessity to the old Admiral. Guiseppe got the rough edge of his tongue often enough, but so did everyone else. The old man lived at the top of the Torre Sao Juliao and it was his banner which Robin had seen floating on the high flagstaff when the *Regazzona* sailed over the bar of the Tagus.

The expedition was to sail in the summer of 1587, but nothing was ready at its time. Medina-Sidonia tarried at Cadiz with the squadron of Andalusia, there were no tidings of the galleons from the Levant and Naples, the *San Felipe*, King Philip's own East Indiaman, had not yet come to harbour with its treasure, the gold fleet from the west was behind its time. And then in March Drake struck Cadiz, anchored a few weeks later off Cascaes, flaunting his English flag in the sight of Santa Cruz's windows, and, realising that the harbour was not to be forced, was off again to the west.

"Look at that man!" cried Santa Cruz. "And there's my good

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Master in his Oratory making out a list of rations for me between prayer and prayer. So many aves for San Lorenzo, so much dried fish for each soldier, and more aves than dried fish! Drake'll have the gold fleet next."

He pushed out with what ships he had ready in pursuit, and coming to the Azores found that Drake had picked up the *San Felipe* with a hundred thousand pounds' worth of treasure on board and was out of reach bound homewards for Plymouth.

Robin sailed on that wild goose chase with Santa Cruz, and by the month of July when he returned, the year was too late for the Enterprise of England.

"The astrologers were right," thought Robin. "It will be 1588, after the conjunction of the planets, when the great ordeal of the world will come."

Through the rest of the year the work went faster at Lisbon and out of the confusion a sort of order began to emerge. The gold fleet came safely to port, Oquendo brought his fleet from Passages into the Tagus, the galleons from Naples joined the Armada, and Santa Cruz's great bureau grew fuller and fuller with lists of ships and their captains, their armament and their complements of men, their barrels of water, their stocks of powder.

Robin used to slip out of the Tower when he had a few hours free and make his way to the eastern quarter of the town. By the side of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Graça a steep narrow flight of steps led up into a network of small streets where little houses painted a dark red and roofed with green tiles climbed one upon the shoulders of the other as though each hoped to get a clearer view of the harbour. In the midst of them a tavern was kept by a kinsman of the Ferrantis. There Robin met Andrea and, after drinking a bottle of wine the two men would move away into the darkness and Robin would pass to him a letter which Andrea would take away with him to Figliuzzi's house.

They were bulky letters now and Figliuzzi began to wonder about them. He weighed one of them in his hand, thoughtfully.

"How does Guiseppe get these details?" he asked.

"Your Excellency," Andrea replied, "it might be that he had a key."

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Figliuzzi remembered that he had had some keys made for some new boxes of his own. A duplicate key from an impression upon wax might have been cut at the same time. It was on the whole better not to inquire.

"He runs a great risk," Figliuzzi continued as he locked the letter away.

"He is in a great hurry," said Andrea. "He gave me news for your ear. The Marquis de Santa Cruz will never sail with the Armada."

It was now the month of January, 1588, the preparations far advanced and the whole navy assembled except the Andalusian fleet, or rather that part which Drake had left of it. That still loitered at Cadiz. Figliuzzi was startled. Here was news indeed to rejoice the heart of his good friend Walsingham.

"Giuseppe is sure of that?"

Andrea bowed solemnly.

"His Excellency is dying. He is seventy-three, he was stricken to death by the burning of Cadiz and Drake's flag waving within sight of St. Julian's Castle. His legs are swollen. His blood beats in his veins till it seems they must burst. He rages, sparing neither God, nor Man, nor Drake."

And in this classification Andrea was only echoing the general opinion. There were four species of existences recognisable; God, the Devil, Man, Drake. Giovanni Figliuzzi sent Robin's letter on with all the speed at his disposal and day by day the fleet of England grew.

The worst days to Robin of all that long ordeal occurred in the first week of February of the year 1588, the year of prophecy. The accumulation of the months brought a certain habit and ease in the performance of his task, but counterbalanced that with a fear that with habit might come carelessness. The fear was all the more real because he wanted youth's large share of sleep. He found himself falling asleep upon his feet as he waited at a door; for a fraction of a second he would lose his senses whilst he bent over his master's gouty leg and get a cut across the shoulders for his indifference. It is right to say that the menial character of his duties no more troubled him than it troubled in later days a good soldier in the

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trenches. The fastidious are bad servants when great causes are at stake. But under the stress of the long dangerous days and the yet more dangerous nights, the steps of the great Church in Madrid were growing dim, his own country with its honest friendly people, as Walsingham had described it, was becoming a fabulous island set in seas which never were, and even the face of the maid he loved was receding amongst the stars. So far he had plodded on, care at his elbow, in his eyes, in his steps. But how long would it be before in some moment of fatigue he would cease to care what happened to him, to the Queen in her garden at Whitehall, even to Cynthia and Abbot's Gap, so long as oblivion came and sleep?

The first of these worst days was Tuesday the fourth day of the month. All that morning Santa Cruz, tormented by his pain, was rating his commanders. First it was Medina-Sidonia's turn, a poor dull man of middle-age who loved to idle away his days in his orange groves at St. Mary Port and found himself tossed by the favour of his King into great duties for which he had neither capacity nor will. He had travelled overland from Cadiz and climbed the stairs to the high lodging in St. Julian's tower where Santa Cruz sat over his papers at his big table. Robin showed him in and closed the door, but the old man's voice roared out with so much violence that hardly a word was lost to the valet on guard outside.

"Look!" he cried. "We are to carry a hundred and eighty long-frocked priests, and eighty-five surgeons! Eighty-five surgeons to twenty thousand men and the English to fight! God save us but we've tasted of those men!"

Medina-Sidonia smiled complacently.

"There'll be little fight in them when they behold the Armada."

"They'll go down on their bellies, I suppose, at the wind of our coming, as Drake did when he ran under your guns at Cadiz and burnt your ships to give him an appetite for his dinner. And you command the Andalusian squadron! Mother of God, but for His Majesty's most remarkable good will you'd command no ship at all in my fleet. I wouldn't buy my bedpans from you if you were a tinker, nor a pair of galligaskins if you were a tailor. Well—what are you short of besides seamanship?"

Medina-Sidonia was short of five guns for each ship.

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"And you've powder for a day. What are we going to England for? The fireworks?"

"We shall grapple and board," said Medina-Sidonia.

"Ho! ho!" cried the Marquis in a fury of derision. "They'll come into your parlour, will they? Just simple tarry sailor-men, the English! And Elizabeth? She'll crumble like the walls of Jericho, I suppose, when you blow your penny trumpet! Ouch!"

For he had stamped with his swollen foot. Medina-Sidonia left the note of his requirements on the table and got himself away out of the range of the old man's voice. But Miguel de Oquendo went next into that high room and met with a different reception. The bellowing voice sank to a murmur, and an hour passed before Santa Cruz struck his gong. Robin entered the room. Santa Cruz was writing. Oquendo was standing in front of the hearth with his back to a log fire. His fame stood next to the Grand Admiral's in all but Philip's esteem. He was then a young man in the early thirties, of a high courage and a cool mind, a good sailor, a great gentleman and with such good looks as few are blessed with. Robin was careful not to look towards him.

"You will fetch some papers from His Excellency's ship, the *Señora de la Rosa*, Guiseppe. Here is an order."

Robin took the paper, and turning so that he showed his back to Oquendo, walked towards the door. But he had not taken more than two steps before a strong hand was laid upon his shoulder and swung him round.

"Stop! You!"

For the first time Robin stood face to face with Oquendo, and his heart sank. Very slowly the Spaniard looked him over from his feet to his face. They were of a size and it seemed to Robin that he had never seen eyes so piercing. His heart went down into his shoes, would have sunk lower if it could, so watchfully did those keen eyes survey him. Worse than his glance, however, was Oquendo's silence. He twisted the ends of his moustache. Then he lifted himself once or twice upon his toes. But still he said not a word. And turning about in his chair, old Santa Cruz looked on with a grin.

Robin knew that the Marquis had a tenderness for Oquendo, he recognised in him a mate, a man of his own quality, and allowed him

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a liberty which he vouchsafed to no one else. But Robin was strung to such a tension of his nerves that he saw disaster in the smallest anomaly. He was in the condition of Santa Cruz himself, a sharp sound and he was tormented, a vibration and he shook.

"Guiseppe?" said Oquendo, twirling his moustaches.

"Marino," added Robin.

"You're of the seaboard?"

"Of Leghorn."

Oquendo's eyes brightened.

"Can you handle a rope?"

Robin's heart began to climb again into its proper place.

"Your Excellency, I sailed in my father's fishing boat when I was a boy."

"And yet you can spend your life between the pantry and the parlour when there's the ocean at your feet and riches to be gained."

Oquendo laughed contemptuously and Santa Cruz broke in.

"Miguel, leave that boy alone. Mother of God, am I to have my servants filched from me? Go and pick up a galley slave, Miguel. If Guiseppe sails with the Armada, he sails on my flagship and nowhere else. Off with you, Guiseppe, upon your business."

Robin ran out of the range of Oquendo's keen eyes as quickly as he could. He made haste to the *Lady of the Rose*, which was lying against the easternmost quay, delivered his order and was given the packet of forms and requisitions and made off homewards. But he had not reached the Tower when he saw Oquendo coming towards him. That would not have troubled him, but Oquendo saw him, and hailed him.

"Guiseppe! Guiseppe Marino!"

Robin perforce stopped.

"Your Excellency, I have the papers."

Oquendo waved them aside.

"Have you no wish to make your fortune, lad? There's treasure in England. A man might take that trip with me and go back to Italy with his pockets lined with gold, and his soul saved into the bargain. What say you?"

Robin murmured a few words of his duty to his master. Oquendo stroked his moustache and laughed.

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"You can keep that pap for the old man, when you put him to bed. A tall lad like you nursed on the sea should be thrusting a boarding pike not holding up a cripple. The *Lady of the Rose*—remember that name! I'll hide you on board where the old curmudgeon'll never find you."

And with a nod he sauntered on along the clanging quays. The great Admiral's day was done. Out with him! Brutal days wanted brutal ways. Not that Oquendo bothered his head about his brutality. He was in the pride of his strength and old men are for the dust-heap as all the world knows. He left behind, however, a very troubled Guiseppe. Not troubled about the vanity of past triumphs or the disconsolate tragedies of age—such speculations could be left to the philosophers—but about his own affairs. The odd apathy which had been creeping over him was dissolved.

"Santa Cruz won't let me go. Oquendo wants me. All very flattering but most damnably inconvenient," he reflected. "Figliuzzi's off to Madrid in a month. His work here is done, mine almost done. One night more and every detail of every ship down to the last barrel of water will be written down for Mr. Gregory of Lyme. But then? How am I to get away?"

He could find no answer to that question, but the night of Thursday answered it for him. It was a dark clear night. From the guard-room in the foot of St. Julian's Castle a few lights shone out upon the water, but above it the great Tower was lost in darkness. Not a lamp shone at any window. There was no sound of any movement. Yet in the blackness of a corridor something did move. There was a vibration in the air, swift and faint as though someone far away unlatched a window silently and as silently closed it. But no window was opened and closed; someone had passed. That was all. And in a little while at the end of the corridor a pale glimmer modified the darkness. Someone had opened a door upon a slatted shutter. Almost at once the door closed again, the corridor was once more black. Inside the office of Santa Cruz, however, Robin Aubrey was standing. From his feet to his chin he was sheathed in black and a black visor masked the whiteness of his face. Only his breathing showed that he was there.

He stood like an image until the shape of the room, the bulk of the



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table, the massive bureau, the frame of the long window swam into his vision. The floor was covered with thick matting. Mats, too, were laid at the foot of the door and of the window, for on days of gale the wind stormed at every cranny of this high lodging like a fierce enemy. Robin lifted the edge of the mat at the door and covered the crack between the door and the floor. He had no shoes upon his feet and he moved silently as a wraith. He glided from the door to the window. He was wearing long black hose and a doublet of black velvet fastened with black buttons, and without a tag or a point to catch upon the edge of a table or the back of a chair. He set the doors of the window open upon the room, and unlatched the shutters. Outside the shutters a balcony of carved and ornamental stone overhung the rocks a hundred and fifty feet below. He looked out towards Cascaes and that open sea where he had dreamed once to light a funeral pyre which should redden the water with its glow and confuse the heavens with its smoke. A boy's dream, but even now after this long year lived under the outspread hand of death, he could not smile at it except wistfully. He shut the vision of it from his eyes. His work lay here in the room behind him. His last night's work. He stepped back into the room, closed the shutters but left them unlatched and left the doors wide open. Then he crossed to the table. From the pocket of his doublet he took a candle, and placing it on the table, struck a light and lit it, and the room became a den peopled with huge distorted shadows. Two thick wax candles stood in heavy candlesticks of silver upon the table. Robin removed one of the candles and set his own in its place. Robin's candle was of wax too, with a cotton wick so that it should give out no smell.

About his waist a strong cord was wound and a dagger hung in the cord. He laid the dagger on the table. Then he took a key from his pocket and inserted it into the lock of the *escritoire*. He let down the flap. The pigeon-holes were stuffed with papers bound together by tape. Other papers lay upon the ledge, beneath the pigeon-holes—the last details of the equipment of the last ships to be mobilised for the *Enterprise of England*. Robin took them over to the table. There was paper enough and to spare littered upon the table. Robin gathered some sheets and set them ready at one end. He had a pen with him and a small bottle of ink slung on a black cord about his

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shoulders. He drew a wooden stool up to the table and sitting down upon it began to copy the documents which he had taken from the bureau.

"Italy with the Levant Islands, under Martine de Vertendona, ten Galeons, eight hundred mariners, two thousand soldiers, three hundred and ten great pieces," he began to write, and so followed on with the particulars of each ship. What store of biscuit each ship carried, so that each man might have a quintal a month for six months, how many pipes of wine, how many quintals of bacon, how many of cheese and fish, of oil and vinegar, of peas and rice. How many barrels of fresh water, what number of spades and lanterns, of spare sails and ropes, of ox hides and lead plates to mend the damage done by the cannon of the enemy. Then came the number of bullets and quintals of powder for each gun, of the muskets and calivers for the fighting tops, the partisans and the halberts for the boarders. Robin wrote the particulars down with the name of each ship against them, whether great ship or caravel. And the night waned as he wrote. Each of the official documents he set back on the ledge of the bureau in its original place as soon as he had copied it. And at four o'clock in the morning, when one more hour would have seen his year's work done with, his head nodded on his shoulders, his eyes willy-nilly closed and re-opened and closed again and as he sprawled forward on the table, his elbows slid out. One of them touched his dagger and pushed it to the table's edge. Robin drew a long breath, his head was on his hands, his whole body relaxed in a delicious irresistible relief. His arms spread just a fraction further apart, and the dagger clattered upon the oaken elbow of Santz Cruz's great chair and tumbled with a thud upon the floor.

For a moment Robin wondered whether the clatter was a noise in a dream. But he saw the dagger on the floor. As he picked it up, he heard a great thump on the ceiling above his head, and his blood stood still in his veins.

Santa Cruz had heard it too. The catastrophe, foreseen and guarded against through so many nights had caught him at the last.

A feeling of despair descended like a cloak upon Robin's shoulders, muffling for a moment his every sense, so that he remained on his

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stool in a paralysis. And over his head he heard Santa Cruz dragging himself about his room.

During the first moments when activity returned to him, Robin acted like an automaton, but he acted quickly; so carefully had he rehearsed each successive thing which he must do, if this mischance befell. He put back the requisition which he was copying into the bureau and locked the flap and slipped the key into his pocket. He folded and placed within the bosom of his shirt the copies which he had been making. He set the stool against the wall and he heard the thump of the old sailor's stick upon the floor and a door whine upon its hinges. He thrust the pen between the buttons of his doublet, and fixed the stopper in the ink bottle about his neck. Santa Cruz would be upon the stairs now, but he could only move slowly and with great care lest with his huge weight he should fall. Robin could hear him shaking the house.

Robin replaced the big candle in its socket, blew out his own and thrust it into his pocket. Was it his own voice which he heard coming and going in sobbing breaths? He had come so near to the end of his service, and now disaster and death!

But he was wide awake now. He placed the dagger between his teeth. He slipped across the room and drew down the mat at the door until his fingers told him that it lay flat. He went out by the window, setting the latch at an angle and closed the glass doors behind him. With the thin edge of his dagger inserted between the doors he dropped the latch into its socket. He went out on to the balcony and closed the shutters, just as he had closed the windows. He was on the balcony now, but there was neither safety nor concealment yet; and through the lattices he heard the door of the room flung open and saw the flicker of a candle held in an unsteady hand.

Just within the doorway of the room old Santa Cruz was standing, his swollen leg criss-crossed with bandages, his great bulk muffled in a crimson robe. He leaned upon a thick oak stick and in his left hand he held above the level of his eyes a candlestick with a lighted candle. Under his left armpit was tucked a naked sword. It was not fear which made his hand shake, though the grease from his candle bespattered the floor. For he looked as dangerous and angry as a

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bull, a bull with his strength sapped by the banderilleros. His eyes travelled about the room warily, truculently. Something had clattered in this room, bounced and clattered again and then fallen with a soft thump. By the mercy of God he had been awake. For the first time he thanked Him that old men can't sleep. For not one of his mouldy lack-linen scullions would have heard it; or done aught if he had heard it but bury his craven head under his blanket. No, not even the soft-footed smooth-faced lackey who could nurse him like a woman and sustain him like a man. Dastards, sheep, quick-silver at the sight of a cut finger!

The old man dragged himself across the room to the table. He dropped rather than laid his candlestick upon it. He lifted his oak stick on to it and clung to the back of his armchair, breathing in great difficult gusts which wrenched his body and made a horrible loud sound in that empty room. When he had recovered a little he bent over the chair and felt the cushions on the seat. No, no one had sat there. He reached forward and felt the big round candles. The wax of both of them was hard and cold. No one had lighted them. Yet something had fallen in this room, something had struck and clattered.

"What? . . . Who? . . . Answer me!" he bullied and he thumped the table with his fist.

All this time he had been holding the sword under his arm, and it shone in the wavering candle-light from its great basket-hilt to the point, now bright and blinding like sunlight on a mirror and now blood-red. He lurched along the table and over the matting to the glass-doors of the window. The latch fitted into its socket, fitted home; and the day of finger-prints had not yet come. He raised the latch and let it fall back again into its place.

It might be—yes. Fingers which were not heavy with age or crippled with rheumatics, fingers which were cunning and deft, fingers which he would cut off at the knuckles, there on that table with this sword he carried under his arm, might have shot that latch down into its socket. He should have bidden Guiseppe change that latch for a bolt. No, Guiseppe should have changed it without any bidding at all. Mother of God, what were servants for! . . .

Unless—yes, unless Guiseppe's fingers were the fingers he was

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going to mutilate. The rascal was on the balcony. Good! Well, he must be deft and cunning himself. He wanted to see those hands stretched on the table flat on their palms, yes, and above them a rogue's white face and frightened eyes, and a foolish chattering mouth slobbering for mercy. But he must be cunning and quick and—just for a minute—God vouchsafe that miracle if ever for his master he had done good work!—just for a minute move with the nimbleness of youth—the nimbleness of Guiseppe Marino.

Very quietly he unlatched the glass doors. At a touch they swung noiselessly into the room. Santa Cruz listened. He could hear nothing. The rogue was outside those shutters holding his breath, cowering in a corner of the balcony! Santa Cruz took his sword now by the hilt into his right hand. Good! He felt twice the man he had been a minute ago. Now for that moment of youth! He gathered his great frame together, he drew a long breath like a diver before he dives. And the miracle happened. He sprang. Heavy and awkward and grotesque, he sprang with all his force and all his weight against the shutters. They splintered and burst like so much tissue paper. Old Santa Cruz was carried forward by his weight and flung against the balustrade of the balcony, and his sword rattled against the stone. He could turn no quicker than a charging rhinoceros. "The rogue has me," he gasped.

He was at the mercy of anyone upon that balcony with a dagger in his hand whether he cowered in a corner or not. But nothing happened. No steel blade slid cold and sharp into the fat of his back. He turned himself about—even that movement was difficult now—and stood amazed. There was no one on the balcony.

Then Santa Cruz swayed like a drunkard. His head swam, the stars in the dark sky whirled in a mad dance before his eyes.

"Mother of God, what's happening to me?" he wailed, suddenly pitiful and afraid like a child. Something was happening to him, something quite new, something quite stupendous, but what it was, he couldn't think. He was too dizzy to think at all.

A sharp touch in the night air gradually brought him round. He drew it into his lungs and the stars having had their fling settled themselves again in their orderly pattern. Santa Cruz took a hold upon himself.

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"This won't do . . . I can't afford it. No, Spain can't afford it either. . . . There's my sword on the floor of the balcony—I'll not leave it there! No, I'll not leave it there to shame me."

But some instinct of prudence warned him not to stoop. Or rather, not to try to stoop. Try as he might, he knew that he could never reach that sword with his hand. His crimson night-robe was gathered about his body in a girdle of twisted silk. He unwound the girdle and turning about so that his buttocks rested against the balustrade, doubled it and with the loop angled for the hilt of his sword. Once he had caught it, but only by an ornament, and he had not raised it more than a few inches from the ground when it slipped and clanged once more against the stone. But the old man was obstinate. He would not leave it. It had been too good a friend to be thus disrespectfully treated. Left to rust in the dews of the morning, the sword which had seen Lepanto and Terceira and was to catch and cast back the sunlight from the white cliffs of England at the Narrows? No, indeed. Never did a schoolboy angle for a trout in a brook with a greater seriousness than this old gentleman of Spain for his sword on his balcony over the Tagus. But he succeeded in the end. The loop caught the weapon below the basket hilt and a moment afterwards Santa Cruz was fondling and pinching the blade as though he was a boy again and the hilt the soft palm of his mistress.

But he was cold now. There was a dampness in the air which crept into the marrow of his bones. He was shivering and with such sharp spasms that the blade of his sword beat a tattoo against the stone balustrade. And he had still something to do before he could make sure whether or no his secrets had been stolen. Clutching at the window frame, he drew the shutters close behind him, then stared downwards at his left foot rather stupidly. "There's something woundily odd," he said aloud.

There was no feeling in his left leg at all. It wouldn't hold him up. It wouldn't do anything. It wouldn't even hurt him any more. Somehow he managed to lumber into the room on one leg; and, now clinging to a chair, now to the edge of the table, he dragged himself laboriously and painfully to his bureau. He had the key in the pocket of his dressing-gown and he unlocked it and let down the lid. The papers on the top? Yes, they recorded the equipment of the *Santa*

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*Ana*, galleon from the Levant. She was short of her big culverins. Yes, there was the note which he had written in the margin that very night. Nothing had been disturbed.

Santa Cruz locked up his bureau again and coming to his table dropped heavily into his great chair. Was it possible, he wondered, that his senses were playing him false? He had imagined that clatter and thump upon the floor? But, if he heard amiss, why to-morrow he might see amiss, and from that what catastrophes might come? If over there, in the mists of the Channel, he was to see ships where there were no ships, hear the roar of cannon where there were no cannon and set his battle array accordingly? What then of Spain? He threw out his arms wide and so dropped his hand palm downwards on the table; and he felt the palm of his right hand grow wet. Wet?

He lifted it and looked. There was a black smudge upon the skin. He bent sideways and stared at the table. There it was, the proof that his senses had not played him false, the sure sign that his bureau had been rifled, a smear of ink which had not yet dried. With a bellow the old man rose to his feet and fell back again, and so sat stiff and upright with horror glazing his eyes.

For the stupendous sensation which had frightened him on the balcony was coming back upon him, and this second time it was even more real, more appalling. All the great joys except one had passed away from him, the joy of women, the joy of a great ship rolling down the seas before a strong wind, the joy of choice food delicately cooked, the joy of hunting days in the marshes by the side of the Guadalquivir. But one joy remained and swamped even the memory of the others—the joy of the *Enterprise of England*. He railed at Philip his master, cursed his penny-wisdom, and his slow meticulous brooding over details and particulars which were the proper concern of underlings. But he served him with a ferocious loyalty.

The *Enterprise of England* was to set so rich a crown upon his head as not even Imperial Rome had dreamed of. And he Santa Cruz alone could have done it, for he alone amongst the Admirals knew what great stuff the English were made of, what hard fighters they were, what great leaders sprang from nowhere to command them, and how

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from the Scotch Border to the Channel Ports a passion for liberty and faith was ringing like one deep note of a gong.

The joy of that vast Enterprise was forsaking Santa Cruz now. It was fading away. Even the anguish that he who should have led would have no share in it at all, was fading away behind a red mist which every instant grew denser and redder and was flecked with fire like the discharge of cannon. Santa Cruz could not move and in his wide-opened eyes the awful look of horror stayed long after his heart was still.

And meanwhile what of Robin? The balcony on which he had taken refuge was supported upon two strong brackets of fretted stone which ended in straight columns with projecting feet carved to resemble the heads of dolphins. These columns descended into the air just below the two exterior corners of the balcony. Robin had looked down upon them from the balcony many a time with a shrinking heart. The columns were about five feet in height and below the dolphins' heads at the end of them he could see the waves breaking upon the rocks a hundred and fifty feet beneath. On one of those heads he would have to balance himself if need befell. And need had befallen.

He uncoiled the rope from about his waist, leaving the last loop securely tied about his middle. The coping of the balcony was stretched upon stone columns separated one from the other by a space of six inches. Robin dared not yet make fast the loose end of his rope to one of these columns, since, if he did so, the rope must pass over the top of the ledge and betray him. He bestrode the ledge and bending down doubled the rope round one of the columns from the outside. Then, commending his soul to God, he swung down upon the doubled rope, and with his feet felt for and found the dolphin's head. There he stood clinging desperately to the rope and dizzy as a drunkard. He dared not look down; he closed his eyes. If he slipped on the smooth stone beneath his feet! If his hands loosened their grip. Almost they did, almost the desire to loose his hold and have done with it mastered him. But there was too much at stake for cowardice long to have its way with him. There was England, his uncompleted work, Walsingham's faith in him, and Cynthia—the Cynthia he had



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seen in his Library, dominating her fears and her full heart, her lovely face alive with courage. Robin renewed his spirit from the strong image of her in his thoughts.

He reached up, he opened his eyes wide, and balancing himself upon his tiny perch, he tied the loose end of the rope with a clove-hitch round a column. After a second or two he looked down below the tiny pedestal on which he stood.

But he was not safe from detection even now. Santa Cruz had but to bend his head over the balcony and he would be seen. He would be caught in as helpless a position as could be imagined. A blow from Santa Cruz's great stick, a cut from Santa Cruz's long sword and he would go hurtling down through the void on to the rocks below.

Behind the foot of the pillar on which he stood a tiny ledge ran along the inner side of the latticed bracket underneath the balcony to the wall. Only on that ledge would he be screened from the eyes of anyone upon the balcony. But to reach that hiding-place, he must step round the pillar from the dolphin's head, he must get a hand-grip on one of the holes cut through the stone, and this on a dark night when all must be done by feel and touch and the least slip meant a cry and a broken body to make a plaything for the waves. Robin, clinging still with his left hand to the rope, groped with his right round the pillar along the great bracket until it reached a diamond-shaped cut in the stone. Through this he passed his hand and gripped hard and tight. Then he passed round his right foot, and felt for the tiny ledge. It was some inches below the level of the dolphin's head, and Robin's toes went tapping and stretching as he lowered them. He touched it at last. It was not wide enough, but it must serve. He drew himself under the balcony, shifted his left foot from the dolphin's head to the ledge, found another cutting for his left hand and so clung there to the bracket like a bat.

The end of his rope he must leave knotted about the foot of the balustrade else he would never be able to climb up again on to the balcony. It was not likely to be seen even by one who searched on a night like this.

"The old man must stub his toe on the knot before he discovers it," Robin said to himself, and he heard the shutters above his head

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splinter and crash back against the wall and the old man lurch against the balustrade. His sword rattled on the floor.

Thereafter a silence followed, all the more alarming because Robin could not account for it. Santa Cruz was standing without a movement just over his head. Robin could hear him breathing, so still was the night. Why, then, he must hold his breath himself and he, too, must not move, must not ease his muscles by the slightest change of pose, lest the breast of his doublet or his sleeve should rustle against the stone.

A sharp fear made Robin's heart jump into his throat.

"He has seen the rope knotted round the baluster. He is standing up there playing cat and mouse, waiting for a cramp to knot up my tendons and snatch me from my hold!"

He saw himself swinging out on the rope into the air and then the flash of Santa Cruz's sword and the rope severed.

A movement was made upon the balcony at last, but it only added vividness to his horrid vision. The sword dragged on the stone, fell down again and rang and was lifted at the last.

"He'll use it now," Robin thought. "Trust him to use it." He looked down between his feet to the white of the breakers flashing in the darkness a hundred and fifty feet below and wrenched his eyes quickly away. The old man's heavy step sounded and Robin clung even more desperately to his buttress.

"Now!" he thought. "Now!"

And, whilst he was expecting to hear the whistle of the sword and feel the rope drop loose, the shutters were slammed to again.

Such was his relief that he was in greater danger of falling from his hold than he had yet been that night. The sweat poured down his face, his legs trembled, a weakness was stealing over him. He hooked an arm through the lattice work of the great bracket and then loosening his grasp of the rope he took a coil of it round his upper arm and seized it again and so stood the more secure.

Santa Cruz was satisfied then! But Robin must give him time to drag back to his room; and he had now no sounds to guide him. He could only guess how much longer he must wait. He counted a hundred very slowly. He had to move now if ever he was to take that long upward step round the pillar on to the Dolphin's head. He drew

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in a deep breath, raised his left foot, found the head under the sole of his foot, shifted his weight and hauled himself round and up. For a few moments he swayed dangerously—once more on the smooth curving stone. Then he pulled himself up by the rope, secured a hold upon the coping with one hand and the next instant stood again upon the balcony. He cut the rope away from the baluster and wound it again about his waist. Then he turned to the shutters and consternation seized him. For through the lattices of the shutters a light still shone.

There was no going back for him on to that dolphin's head. Nothing could have made him face the ordeal again. He would wait where he was, and, if Santa Cruz came out again on to that balcony—well, it was the Admiral's great share in Spain in the one scale and his little share in England in the other. Robin drew his dagger from his belt—and waited and—waited. The night grew chill, there was a freshness in the air, in a little while the dawn would come. He glided to the shutters and opened them. He could see into the room, but the table where Santa Cruz sat was to the left and outside the range of his eyes.

He could hear no sound.

"The old man has fallen asleep or gone to his room and left his candle burning."

Robin stole on tip-toe into the room. Asleep? There was something in the Admiral's attitude, some vague suggestion of collapse which spoke of a repose deeper than sleep. Robin with his dagger ready in his right hand crept to his side. The old man's mouth had fallen, his eyes were staring, his breast quite still. Death not sleep.

The bureau was open. Robin took the two papers still left to be transcribed, he drew up the oak stool again to the table and by the light of Santa Cruz's candle, with Santa Cruz's dead body sagging at his side, he sat himself to complete his work. He must be quick, yet must omit nothing and put no wrong figures down through haste—guns, culverins, minions, baseliscos, soldiers, mariners, barrels of cheese, of salted meat, of water.

He was getting towards the end of his work when an appalling thing happened in that room. The dead man moved at Robin's side, his arm, which had been lying on the table struck Robin and slipping

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down, dangled. Robin sprang to his feet, his dagger was raised to strike, and sheer horror checked his hand in time. The muscles of the old man stiffened by death were relaxing. As Robin watched him, he sank lower in his chair, he became smaller, he shrank, as if only now the undaunted spirit had left reluctantly its outworn shell.

Robin sat down again to his work. When he had finished, he left the bureau open, the papers which he had copied in front of Santa Cruz, and the candle still burning. As he crept to his room, the dawn was breaking.

## DENNIS WHEATLEY

### *Espionage*

I really went down to Wimpehays to see the roses. Roses are a bit of a passion with me, and Rowley Thornton's garden has a reputation. It was after lunch, as we were sauntering along the flower-bordered paths, with the blue haze of our cigar smoke circling about our heads in the sunshine, that the talk turned to espionage.

"That army-officer case was incredible," I said. "I had no idea that such things still happened in these days."

"Hadn't you?" He turned to smile at me, the little wrinkles creasing up at the corners of his blue eyes. "Well, they do. I nearly lost my life in Paris less than a month ago——"

"Good God!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean that—would it be—er—infringing the Official Secrets Act, or anything, to tell me about it?"

"I don't think so," he answered slowly. "You see, I left the service years ago, so in a sense this was a private venture—but I must change the names, of course."

I nodded, glancing at the tall, slim figure by my side with newly awakened interest. He paused a second to run his hand over the smoothly brushed hair just greying at the temples, and then went on thoughtfully:

I was on my way down to St. Tropez, and when I left London I hadn't a thought in my head except the joys of a fortnight's cruise round the Balearic Isles in Larry Hinchcliffe's yacht. I got drawn into this wretched business only because fate decreed that I should choose one particular compartment on the Calais train.

There was only one other fellow in it, a smallish man in a neat dark blue suit and a black slouch hat, and he was already working on a pile of invoices when I got in, so I took him for an ordinary business man. Then, just as the train was about to steam out for

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Paris, there was a terrific commotion in the corridor—train conductors, porters, Cook's men, luggage, and a girl.

I suppose I should say "woman" really, since she couldn't have been under thirty. She had on a little hat which showed off her hair to perfection—bronze gold with a tinge of red in it, but her eyebrows were her really striking feature—long, thin, and tapering, they curved up like the moustaches of a musketeer. I didn't know then what had upset her, but she seemed to be in a towering rage and her face was as white as a sheet.

She stood there in the doorway telling the crowd what she thought of them. Her French was appalling, and I doubt if they understood one-third of what she said. They seemed half apologetic and half surly as they stowed her baggage on the racks and seats.

When they had gone she suddenly put one hand to her tummy and half closed her eyes. I thought she was going to faint and made a move to steady her, but she shook her head and sank into the other corner on the same side as myself.

As the train moved off she sat up and turned a large pair of angry eyes on me. "You are not French?" she said.

"English," I answered, gazing back. Her eyes were a queer tawny colour flecked with green.

Then she looked at the other fellow, "And you, monsieur?"

"Norwegian," he told her with a little bow.

"*Ach, Gott sei dank*—these French are horrible," she exclaimed.

She was an unusual type and obviously intelligent, so I inquired her nationality, although it was already pretty certain what it was.

"I am a German," she shot at me with an angry lift of her chin, "but I might be a leper from the way they treat me here. You speak German perhaps?"

I nodded and she broke into a violent diatribe in her own tongue. She was on her way back to Germany apparently and should have caught the train that left ten minutes earlier than mine. On account of her nationality the French had put her passport aside to be dealt with last, and gone through her luggage with a tooth-comb. In consequence she'd missed her train and, worse, her sleeper on the Berlin express. That meant she'd have to spend a quite unnecessary night in Paris, and her long tapering eyebrows went up into her

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bronze-gold hair as she scowled over the iniquities of the French. To crown it all, she said, she was only just recovering from an operation and hardly fit to travel—yet, in spite of that, they'd kept her standing on the platform in agony for over half an hour.

The Norwegian had been busy with his papers all the time, and when she suddenly swung on him and asked: "Do you not also think it is disgraceful of them?" he looked up with a puzzled stare.

"Excuse please, Fräulein—my German is not much." So she turned back to me exclaiming: "*Ach!* I feel so ill."

I suggested that she might like to put her feet up, and moved over to the other side of the compartment to give her room; for the first time her face broke into a smile.

"What about a little cognac?" I went on. "I've got some in my bag—it will do you good."

Those curious eyes lit up her face in an extraordinary manner as she thanked me, and I got out my flask. Then she gave me another little smile—said she would try to rest a little, and wriggled down to her full length.

After that I sat staring out of the window for a bit—somehow I'd lost all interest in my book. Then I began to study the Norwegian in an idle way.

I had been facing him before, but now that I could see him in profile it struck me that there was something familiar about his face. It was his nose that reminded me of someone—a long, thin, knife-like affair, but for the life of me I couldn't think where I'd seen a beak like that before.

"*Ein bischen nehr Branntwein bitte?*"

It was the girl speaking of course, and I fumbled for my flask. "More brandy?" I asked stupidly. "Oh yes, of course—here you are." I gave her the cup, but my mind had flashed back fifteen years to a hovel in the slums of Cairo. Those very words had been spoken then by a man whose nose was the twin of the ugly proboscis in the corner.

The girl closed her eyes and I was free to regard the pictures in my brain. Essenbach had given us endless trouble in the old days, fermenting discontent all over the Levant. Towards the end of the war a chap, whom we'll call Manning, and I had run him to earth in

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Cairo. He fought like a devil when we cornered him, but Manning broke an earthenware pitcher over his head, and it was while we were bringing him round that he asked for more brandy.

He broke prison, and got away—the Armistice came soon after and I hadn't heard a word about him since.

I took another look at the "Norwegian". His build was right. Then I glanced at his hands—and that settled the matter. Hands are a marvellous index to character, and almost impossible to disguise—this bird was Essenbach all right.

I should have assumed him to have been out of the game for years—just like myself, but the story about his being a Norwegian set me thinking. He had come from England—and he couldn't have been up to any good.

In the hope of a line I looked up at his luggage and I saw "Felixstowe" on a railway label on one end of his bag.

Well, Felixstowe is only just across the water from Harwich, you know, but somehow there didn't seem much to interest a German of Essenbach's standing there. Then I got another idea: what about Martlesham, the R.A.F. experimental station?—a much more likely spot than Harwich for picking up really important information.

The woman with the intriguing eyebrows sat up as we passed through Amiens. She was looking better for her nap, and after powdering her nose settled herself in her corner and started to chat.

I soon found that we had certain friends in common, mostly among the old ex-officer class in Berlin, and I began to wonder who she could be, but I couldn't lead her on to talk about herself at all.

We had slowed down and were rumbling through Asnières before I realized how time had flown, and in another few minutes we were all collecting our things.

I don't mind confessing that I should have liked to follow up my acquaintance with that interesting young woman, but I couldn't even offer to see her to a taxi—I had Essenbach to attend to.

I passed the barrier a good twenty yards ahead of him, and got under cover in a taxi before he appeared in the station yard.

He had a good look round before he jumped into a cab. I tapped on my man's window, and we set off after him down the Rue Lafayette. We nearly lost him at the Opéra, but spotted him again in the



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Rue de la Paix. As we entered the Place Vendôme I saw that he had pulled up at the Ritz.

I made my chap drive on through the square and then round to the back of the hotel—the entrance to the bar. I paid him off and walked slowly down that endless corridor lined with show cases. I wanted to give Essenbach time to register before I appeared. As I poked my nose round the corner a page was leading him to the lift. I went over to the desk and asked for a room, but I'd hardly spoken to the clerk when I heard a soft voice behind me, and there was the lady of the tawny eyes and intriguing eyebrows.

She gave her name to the other clerk as *Fräulein Lisabetta von Loewring*, but I hadn't time to stop and talk to her.

Five minutes later another taxi set me down at the gates of the British Embassy. I walked through into a courtyard and entered the block of office buildings on the right. I was in luck. The office staff had gone of course, but little, well, let's call him Harvey, was still there.

"Well, Thornton," he grinned at me, "glad to see you—take a seat."

"Know who's come in on the boat train?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Kurt Essenbach," I told him.

"Essenbach?" he repeated. "You mean the chap who went Bolshie after the war and then returned to the German service in 1925? That's interesting—we haven't heard a thing about him for the last two years. What's he up to now?"

"That's your job—not mine," I told him, but I mentioned the *Felixstowe* label and suggested *Martlesham* as a possibility.

"I'd better get through to London," he said, and in a few moments he was talking to someone round the corner from Whitehall. When he put down the receiver his face was grave.

It seemed that I was right. Two days before one of the draughtsmen on the civil side had disappeared from *Martlesham*. Steady fellow—been working there for eighteen months. Essenbach of course—taking his time. The police had failed to trace him, so they set a watch on the ports and got our people to put a man on every boat. He'd slipped through at Dover, but the service man had picked him

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up half-way across—spotted the Felixstowe label—careless that, for an old hand. Anyhow they had wired from Calais and were following him to Paris.

I learned too that Essenbach had been working in the special room because one of the seniors had gone sick—just the chance he'd been waiting for—and although the blue prints were intact it was a hundred to one he'd got a set of tracings from the diagram of our new Fighter. It looked serious to me.

Harvey said that a special man had been sent over by plane, and in the meantime the chap who had spotted Essenbach on the boat would be sitting on his tail.

I felt a bit sick that I hadn't known they were on to him earlier—having hurried to the Embassy had spoilt my chances of what might have developed into something interesting, and as I stood up I told Harvey casually of my meeting with Fräulein Lisabetta.

He was on me like a flash and cursed me for not having mentioned her before. You see, no first-class espionage man ever holds anything a second longer than he need. There is nearly always a messenger to meet him somewhere and relieve him of his stuff. I had left the compartment for a few moments just before we reached Chantilly, so anything might have happened then, and if I hadn't been so rusty I should have thought of it before. Harvey was insistent that she had been sent to meet him, and when I thought it over I felt it was ten to one that he was right.

"We've got to get her, Thornton," he said sharply. "You see that, don't you. Our people are after *him*, only you and I know about her."

Well, I didn't like the job a bit, so I suggested that he should either get in touch with the London men or call in the French.

He told me that I ought to know that all London agents report direct—not to him, he wouldn't know them if he saw them—and that they didn't even know each other. As for the French, we were up against them just as much as all the rest in these days. If they laid hands on those tracings they would photograph them for a certainty before they passed them on to us.

"Why not get on to London again?" I asked. "Tell them what we suspect and they can instruct their people over here."

"But, damn it, man, you know the woman already!" he protested.

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"Look at the lead you've got—give her some dinner somewhere. One of the porters at the Ritz is on my Paris list—he'll search her room while she's with you."

I didn't like the idea, and I said so, but he began to plead with me.

"Now look here, Thornton; this is really serious. If those tracings reach their destination they may do us untold harm. This woman's got to be separated from her luggage for an hour or two—and it's up to you."

Well, it was a service matter and I had no alternative but to give in, so I told him I'd telephone if I could arrange it.

My talk with Harvey hadn't lasted more than twenty minutes, so I was back at the hotel under half an hour, and directly I reached my room I sat down to write a very formal and guarded note. I felt that was the best line and I was right.

Ten minutes after I had sent the letter to her room she telephoned; said how kind it was of me to think of her—that she was feeling better and would like to dine, provided I did not mind that she was not permitted to dance afterwards—then she asked what restaurant I suggested.

I mentioned one or two and we settled on the Tour d'Argent.

I took the opportunity of securing her room number by inquiring at the office which room I had been talking to, and I found that she was next to Essenbach—on the same floor as myself. That settled it in my mind that they were acting together. You see, it is so handy to have another room near your own into which you can slip, when you are liable to be beaten up at any moment.

I told Harvey what I had done, and he asked me to ring him again at a Passy number before I left the Tour d'Argent. He would have heard by then from his man at the Ritz.

When the Lady Lisabetta joined me in the hall an hour or so later, she looked more charming than ever.

I should have enjoyed that dinner if I hadn't known what was going on behind the scenes. In the war, of course, I'd become hardened to dealing with the actress-courtesan type who dabble in espionage, but this was a woman of distinction, so you can imagine how I disliked the false position I was in!

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After we had finished dinner I excused myself for a moment and got Harvey on the 'phone. "Well," I asked, "all serene?"

But it wasn't—his man had drawn blank at the hotel, so she must have the goods on her, and my heart sank like a stone. You see, I knew what was coming next before he spoke.

"You know the drill?" he said.

I knew the drill all right, but I told him I couldn't do it—he must send one of his Paris people along to take over—but he protested that anyone who didn't know her wouldn't have a chance—and wanted to know what sort of midsummer madness I was suffering from.

Then of course I realized where I was drifting. If she had been old and ugly it would never have entered my head to kick at being asked to take the usual steps. As it was, I just hated the idea, but I had to go through with it.

"All right," I agreed reluctantly, "where?"

He told me he would send along a man in a red muffler and black cap to pick me up.

When I rejoined her I suggested another ration of the Old Original Chartreuse. I wanted to give Harvey's man time to reach the Tour d'Argent, and as we weren't going on anywhere she agreed, so we sat there for a bit drinking that marvellous liqueur, which the old monks made before they were kicked out of France. I lit another cigarette and endeavoured to make amusing conversation, but it was a poor effort. She pursed up that big generous mouth of hers with a humorous look and accused me of having spotted someone more attractive than herself when I went out to telephone.

I laughed it off, of course, but I was glad when I felt enough time had elapsed to send for the bill.

Outside on the doorstep I had a quick look round—Harvey had done his job and there was the taxi. The driver's language was a joy as he wangled his cab in front of two others—I recognized him immediately by the cap and muffler.

She didn't notice that we had veered away from the direction of the Ritz until we crossed to the Place de la Concorde. Then she gave me a sharp look and asked where he was taking us. I apologized blandly enough—said I'd forgotten it before, but a friend of mine had asked me to deliver a letter personally in Paris; as I was leaving

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very early next day I'd thought she wouldn't mind if I dropped it on the way back that night.

She sank back in her corner with a little shrug, and I smothered a sigh of relief at her acquiescence—at least I had escaped the wretched business of holding her down for the rest of the journey. You see, I had the rotten job of getting her to a certain house where we could commit the quite illegal act of having her searched.

A few minutes later the driver gave a sharp toot on his horn and swung the cab through a pair of big gates into the courtyard of a private house.

I got out and ran up the steps, the frosted glass door was opened almost immediately—Harvey stood waiting for me in the hall.

"Got her?" he asked at once.

I nodded. His lined face lit up with one of those rare smiles. "Good boy," he said, "bring her in."

I waited a moment, then I went out again and spoke to Lisabetta, told her a story about a business deal in which we were all interested—that the chap who owned the house wanted to write a note for me to take south, and pressed her to come in for five minutes while he did it.

She leant forward, and I just caught her smile in the light from the open doorway. "Colonel Thornton," the eyebrows rose—"this is Paris—a strange house—and it is late! But I think it would be amusing to trust you!"

A fat, motherly old person showed us into a room on the ground floor. Harvey was standing in front of the fireplace—and he wasted no time in formalities.

He said straight out that he was there to safeguard certain interests of his Government. That he knew she had travelled from Calais with a man named Essenbach, who was in the German Secret Service, and that she must hand over anything with which she had been entrusted by him.

As I watched her face I saw a barely perceptible tightening of the mobile mouth. She knew that she'd been trapped, and she swung round on me.

"So it was for this that the kind Colonel asked me to dine? What a humiliation, and what foolishness on my part to assume that it was gallantry!"

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Harvey had the grace to say that I had been acting under his instructions and that it was a service matter. Then he told her firmly that unless she did what he asked he would have her searched.

"I know nothing of Essenbach," she flared. "If you detain me here I will complain to my ambassador."

He explained to her quite patiently that it wouldn't do her any good. The house was taken furnished, and it would be untenanted five minutes after our departure.

Then she threatened to have me arrested by the police, but Harvey had her there again. He'd fixed an alibi for me with half a dozen of his friends—a card-party at a private house.

"Search, then!" She threw a contemptuous glance at me. "Search—but you will find nothing."

Harvey put his finger on the bell and the fat woman appeared in the doorway. I held the door open for Lisabetta and she left the room without a murmur.

I took out my cigarette-case, but he refused to smoke and stood there drumming on the mantelpiece with his finger-nails.

The stout woman came in again—she had a glorious Cockney accent. "She ain't got a thing on 'er, Mr. 'Arvey, sir."

Harvey frowned and asked her if she was dead certain.

"Sure as my old man's in 'Eaven," she piped, as she held out a bundle of silk and lace for his inspection. "Look fer yerself, Mr. 'Arvey, sir."

We waved Lisabetta's garments away impatiently and asked how she had taken it.

"Like a lamb she did," said Phœbe. "I never 'ad the undressin' of a nicer lady, and 'er undies is that fine they must 'ave cost a fortune—not like some as we've 'ad 'ere!"

"Better take her back her things," he told her; "we shall have to keep her here a bit."

Old Phœbe grinned at him. "Very good, Mr. 'Arvey, sir—I'll make the pore dear a nice cup o' tea—jest to cheer 'er up like."

As the door closed I chuckled to myself. The comic relief afforded by that old woman had been a godsend in such a trying situation, but Harvey turned on me with an angry stare.

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"For God's sake don't laugh—it's a damned sight too serious," he snapped.

He'd been on the 'phone to London an hour before, and they were in a flat spin. It seems their first man had reported Essenbach's arrival at the Ritz and been told to go off duty at eight o'clock. You see it is very essential to change the shadow, otherwise you arouse the suspicions of the bird you're after. The second man should have been there to take over, but he'd been forced down by engine trouble near Folkestone and he wouldn't be in Paris till next day. In the meantime Essenbach wasn't even under observation.

That sort of breakdown doesn't happen often, but it is one of the snags in our system that no agent is supposed to know another by sight. If number two had had to report to number one, the first chap would never have gone off duty till the second turned up—still, accidents will happen, and the moment I understood I was looking every bit as worried as Harvey.

"There's only one thing for it," I told Harvey at last, "the old direct method. Telephone your porter to leave a pass-key to Essenbach's room on my writing-table. I may have to wring his neck, but I'll get those tracings somehow."

We arranged that I was to take half an hour's start. I reckoned that would be ample time to do my business—then Lisabetta was to be blindfolded—put in the taxi with Phœbe, and dropped at a quiet spot at the top end of the Tuileries Gardens. She couldn't come to any harm there, and could either take another taxi or walk back to the Ritz.

When I got to my room at the Ritz I found the pass-key on the table, so I changed into my bedroom slippers at once and tiptoed out into the corridor.

Essenbach's room was on the opposite side and about six doors down. The lights in the passage were at half-cock and not a sound broke the stillness. I passed Lisabetta's empty room and slid the key gently into the lock on Essenbach's door, it turned without a sound—then I pressed, and the door gave a trifle.

With a final shove I slipped inside—then crash! something hit me on the head, and I was sent spinning to the floor. The thing was on top of me—a great weighty object, pinning me down. I tried to

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struggle out from underneath it, but before I could get to my knees I got another crack on my skull.

The second blow knocked me silly for a moment, and I just wriggled feebly on the floor while a pair of quick hands ran over me. I was still half stunned, but I tried to grab my adversary's throat. Then, with a sudden sickening jab, he thrust his knee into my stomach.

That finished me and by the time the pain was easing a little he had lashed my arms firmly to my sides.

The light clicked on, and there was Essenbach peering down at me—fully dressed. He had shut the door, and I saw what had knocked me endways the first time. It was a giant booby-trap—a Heath Robinson affair, but efficient. Half the furniture in the room had been used to balance a heavy steamer trunk which was bound to crash on the head of anyone who opened the door more than a foot.

Essenbach took up a hefty automatic, complete with silencer, from the table by his bed and pointed it at me. Then he said that he had been expecting my visit for the last two hours. Like a fool it had never occurred to me that his memory for faces might be as good as mine!

I struggled into a sitting position with my back against the wall, but he tapped his automatic and his eyes bored down into mine, so I had to leave it at that.

Then he began to talk in fierce soft whispers about the old days of the war and afterwards. His eyes never left my face as he told me quite calmly that he meant to do me in. He meant to ensure that I should never interfere with his future activities by recognizing him again.

Well, as you can imagine, I had the wind up pretty badly, and I felt my only chance was to scare him into clearing out at once. So I told him he could do what he damned well liked with me if he chose to risk his neck—but he'd be far wiser to get out while the going was good—the French were after him and I'd only beaten them by a short head. Of course he didn't believe me, but it was the best card I had. Some of the old hands at the Sûreté knew him as well as I did, and if they had the least suspicion that he was in Paris with



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anything worth pinching on him, they would have arrested him on some trumped-up charge and searched him.

I told him that I'd been talking over his exploit with another of our people half an hour before at the Cercle Etrangère when we thought we were alone. Then, I said—as we left the room I'd spotted Moreau buried in a deep arm-chair. Moreau is in the Ministry of the Interior and I knew that Essenbach would know his name. I only had to add that as I left the club I'd seen Moreau hurrying to a telephone box, and I had him properly scared.

He didn't waste time talking, but jerked me to my feet and started to search my pockets. A second later he was flourishing the key of my room in my face. "Walk," he snapped at me, "to your room, *Herr Oberst*—and no noise!"

The muzzle of his pistol was jammed hard in the small of my back, and my hands were still tied firmly to my sides, so there didn't seem much option but to obey.

He shoved me inside my own room and shut the door behind him—then he had the cheek to ask me how long I thought it would be before the French turned up. I lied like a trooper, of course—swore they would be there any moment, and urged him to destroy the tracings before he was caught. After all, they would have been more dangerous to Germany in the hands of the French than to any other country, and I thought I might bluff him into destroying his own handiwork.

He considered that for a moment, then he shook his head. "No," he said suddenly, "I will keep them—also I will get away, but first I must make you safe—lie down."

Well, I could quite understand that he didn't want me chasing him down the corridor and I patted myself on the back for having bluffed myself out of a pretty desperate situation.

With as good a grace as possible I sat down on the floor while he secured my feet with a sash from the curtains—after that I thought he would make a bolt for it, but I found I had badly underrated his fear of the French and intense personal hatred of the English.

He seized me by the collar and dragged me across the floor to my bathroom. I didn't even struggle because I thought he was only going to lock me in, but not a bit of it—he took the cord off my dressing-gown and started to make a noose.

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Can you imagine what I felt like then? I realized with a horrible suddenness that he really meant to do me in. I sat on the floor there thinking desperately—racking my brains for some idea that would literally—save my neck. I began to talk again—quickly, feverishly, of the first thing that came into my head, anything to gain time—although how that would help me I didn't know, for the French were nothing but a myth! I told him about Lisabetta and how I'd wasted the evening leading her into a silly trap.

He stopped his preparations for a moment and stared at me with those cold eyes of his. "So," he said, "you were not then at the club?"

I saw that I'd blundered badly, but I faced it out—swore that I'd gone there after, and that if he doubted my story he had only to wait for Lisabetta to return.

Perhaps I was mistaken, but I thought I saw a sudden flicker of interest in his face, so I babbled on—it was a case of seizing any straw that might serve to turn him from his purpose.

"There's a chance for you," I said. "She'll be back in twenty minutes—you can hide in her room from the French—No. 582—it is next to yours, and she wouldn't give you away in a million years—only hurry or you'll be too late."

His only reply was to stoop down and seize me by the nose—then with his free hand he thrust a sponge into my mouth. That ended the conversation, of course, and I could only flap helplessly about on the floor like a fresh-caught salmon on the bank.

He slid the cord over the hook on the door—fixed the noose round my neck, tested the knot—and then began to hoist!

God! it was a horrible business. I dug my chin down into my chest as hard as I could, but I felt myself being drawn up in steady jerks.

Suddenly I left the ground and the cord tightened round my neck—the hook hit me on the back of the head as he gave a last heave on the cord—and there I was—dangling in the air while he lashed the end of it to the door-knob.

He supported my weight for a moment while he undid the cord that bound my hands to my sides and the curtain sash that tied my feet—then he let me drop.

The second my hands were free I was clawing at my neck, but the

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noose was tight about it and I couldn't get my fingers in. I couldn't shout because the sponge was in my mouth, and even when I wrenched it out I could only gurgie horribly.

Through a haze of pain and dizziness I could see Essenbach as he stood there studying me with cold deliberation. Then he tipped the bathroom chair over just out of my reach and I heard him say:

"Suicide—suicide of Colonel Thornton." After that he left me.

Well, there's one piece of advice I'd like to give anyone who is thinking of committing suicide: *Don't try hanging yourself!* It's a damn sight too painful.

*To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes  
Is delicate and rare,  
But it is not sweet with nimble feet  
To dance upon the air.*

Remember?—Wilde's poem about the man in the condemned cell, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", wasn't it? Well, that's what I did less than a month ago in Paris. Look!—you can still see the mark about my neck.

I soon stopped dancing, though—some glimmer of sanity must have penetrated the pain, and I realized that the more I jiggled the more the noose tightened round my windpipe.

The cord had stretched a little, and I found that as my legs hung slack I could just touch the floor with the tip of one toe. It wasn't enough to bear my weight, but it eased the strain a fraction.

I knew then, as I hung there with the blood drumming in my ears and my eyeballs straining out of their sockets, that I had just about ten minutes to live. I couldn't see the bathroom any more—the pain became excruciating—and I fainted.

Thornton stopped talking suddenly and stooped to examine a flower-bed, leaving me breathless.

"Good God! Thornton," I exclaimed, "you're lucky to be alive. What in the world saved you?"

"Lisabetta found me and cut me down," he said casually.

"Lisabetta?" I said, puzzled. "How did she come to be in your room?"

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He answered my question with another. "What would you have done if you'd been in Essenbach's shoes—expecting to be arrested by the French, and desperately anxious to save your papers?"

"Hidden them," I suggested, "or taken a chance by passing them on to someone else."

"Exactly—when Lisabetta got back to her room she found him there. As one German to another he begged her to get them through. The second he'd gone she came across to me."

"I still don't understand," I murmured.

"Don't you?" his blue eyes twinkled in the sunshine. "*She* was our agent who spotted him on the boat, and she only played the Hun in the train on the chance of getting to know him. It's one of the rules of the service that even if your own side gets up against you through ignorance you must never show your hand until your job is done. A necessary convention for some occasions, perhaps, but in this case it nearly cost me my life."

PETER CHEYNEY

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## ***A Double Double-Cross***

In an attractive villa between Nîmes and Avignon lives Roanne—to be precise, Roanne Lucrezia Loranoff. It was believed by the assortment of individuals who still meet, occasionally, in the little room upstairs at Père Benoit's in Ostend, that Loranoff was not her actual surname but that it was a much more important name. John Varnak of the yellow beard and loud laugh—that same Varnak who was stabbed last August in a mean alley in Leningrad—said that she was a princess. It was, however, agreed that the point was immaterial. She was Roanne—which was sufficient.

In the years which followed the ending of the first war, when open diplomacy was so fashionable that the secret service and intelligence departments of every country were worked to death, Roanne functioned very adequately. She was one of the few aristocratic young women who had escaped from the Soviets with no harm, except a twisted little finger—caused by some ruffian tearing off a too-well-fitting ring—and a desire to annoy anybody who was a man.

She did none of the things which *émigrées* did. She left the stage, the Parisian cabarets and New York society severely alone. She called herself Loranoff, and spied—most excellently. In a year she had made a reputation on counter-espionage work which made old hands jealous. Half a dozen countries employed Roanne at different times. But she served only one master at once. She was dependable. Male secret service people, carefully warned against her wiles, went down like ninepins. In 1920 she rifled John Varnak's despatch-case while he, driven desperate by the pain of her supposed toothache, wandered about Milan at three o'clock in the

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morning in search of a dentist. He said afterwards that he knew it would happen, but that he "couldn't *not* believe her", when she said she was hurt.

From her feet upwards she was the woman that most men dream of. She was supple and slim, but not too slim; her taste in clothes and her method of wearing them were exquisite. Her skin was like milk, and when she pulled off her hat, you expected, for some reason, to see black hair. You did not. She was an ash blonde. Even women gazed after her when she walked. This was Roanne, who, at this moment, lives at the Villa Lucretia between Nimes and Avignon.

## II

When Duplessis stepped off the boat at Dieppe, Roanne, standing on the railway side of the *octroi*, spotted him immediately.

Maltazzi (she was working for Italy at this time) was with her, and she spoke quickly to him.

"Listen, Maltazzi," she said. "That must be Duplessis. Somehow I shall get into conversation with him on the train. But do not let him see you."

Maltazzi nodded, and went off to the train. Roanne watched Duplessis get into a first-class carriage which was unoccupied. Then she pulled up the big chinchilla collar of her cloak round her face, gave a little tug at her cloche hat, darted one quick look at her stockings (like all well-groomed women, she hated the wrinkle which sometimes appears under the knee, even in the best silk stocking) and ordered her porter to put her suitcase in the carriage where Duplessis sat. The porter, somewhat clumsily, knocked the suitcase against the doorway, slightly tearing the leather cover and attracting for a moment the attention of Duplessis, who was reading. He looked up and saw both the tear in the suitcase cover and Roanne, who was just about to enter the carriage. Duplessis looked at Roanne's face and forgot all about everything else.

That look was sufficient for Roanne. The momentary gleam which had appeared in the grey eyes of Duplessis, and her quick glance at his humorous and sensitive mouth, convinced her that he would be easy prey; providing always that he had not been warned and had

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not recognised her from one of the innumerable dossiers which every Intelligence record possessed.

As a matter of fact, Duplessis had not the remotest notion, at that moment, that she was Roanne. He realised simply that she was a remarkably beautiful woman with a wicked little gleam in her eyes; that she had a twisted little finger—he was observant, was Duplessis—and that the idiot porter had torn the patent leather corner of her suitcase. The first realisation nearly ruined Duplessis; the last saved him.

Probably every man who has done Secret Service work has a complex about beautiful women. His mind, so continuously occupied with the fact that "the other side" may be employing some international beauty to trap him, becomes more than cautious about them and, paradoxically, that makes them more attractive.

The train moved off on its way towards Paris. Duplessis sat in his corner, reading a magazine and stealing covert glances over the top at Roanne. She, in the diagonally opposite corner—her plan of campaign definitely settled—composed her features into an expression of heart-broken sadness, and twiddled nervously with her lace handkerchief. Beneath the long lashes her eyes watched Duplessis, who was obviously interested.

For half an hour Roanne did nothing. She sat and looked sad. Then, after some decided twitching of her long fingers and with a spasmodic movement which betokened intense effort of self-control, a sob broke from her. She put her hands to her face, her body relaxed, and she sobbed, bitterly and openly. Roanne was an excellent actress.

It worked. Within three minutes Duplessis was sitting by her side, offering condolence, sympathy, asking if he could do something—would she like some tea? Tea was so refreshing; such a stimulant to the nerves. Roanne, still sobbing, admitted that she would like tea, and Duplessis, rather pleased with himself, went off to get it. While he was gone Roanne arranged her face against his return, and Maltazzi, observing from his distant part of the train the peregrinations of Duplessis in search of tea, grinned a little cynically. He knew Roanne.

It was very natural that, after Duplessis had procured the tea

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and after Roanne had drunk it, Duplessis should endeavour to find out what the trouble was, and if he could be of any assistance.

You have heard already that Duplessis was not an amazingly clever man. His business in the Secret Service was mainly confined to opening reluctant safes for the more clever people, who afterwards dealt with the contents. Being entirely innocent at the moment as to what his mission to Paris might be, he did not suspect Roanne in the remotest degree.

Punctuated by the most charming sobs and with an occasional sidelong glance at Duplessis, which was not without its effect, Roanne haltingly told her story. Her name was Marie d'Enverde. Her mother had died, leaving her certain bonds, payable at sight, in the charge of her young brother, Etienne. Etienne, it appeared, was a bad young man; he drank, he doped; in fact, he did everything that he should not do. Also, he refused to hand over Roanne's legacy.

"Why not take proceedings against him?" Duplessis asked, naturally enough.

To this Roanne replied that she could not bear the publicity. In any event, too much had been heard in Paris of the doings of the aforesaid Etienne. After another little outburst of tears, during which Duplessis sat by Roanne's side and patted her hand in a manner which grew less fatherly at every moment, Roanne went on to say that in a fit of desperation she had even hired a burglar to break into Etienne's flat, open the safe and steal the bonds. But alas! the cracksman could not open the safe. It was a marvellous safe, an entirely new invention, a Duplex safe. Duplessis smiled to himself at hearing this, for in all probability he was the only man in Europe who could open a Duplex safe.

So that, continued Roanne, life was entirely impossible. She was almost penniless. Yet, in this safe of her brother's reposed a small fortune of a million francs, which was rightfully hers, though she could not obtain it. She indulged in another spasm of tears, this time on her comforter's shoulder.

Then the idea came to Duplessis. A wonderful idea! Of course, it was the idea that the clever and beautiful Roanne had intended should come to him—the idea that *he* should open the safe! He



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pointed out to Roanne that he was an engineer occupied in the manufacture of safes, that he knew all about them and that the whole thing would be easy. Roanne was very diffident. She took a great deal of persuading, but eventually she allowed herself to be persuaded.

"It will be quite, quite simple, my dear, my very dear friend," she murmured eventually, "because, you see, my brother will not be at his flat to-night. It is the first-floor flat, thirty-seven, *rue Clichy*. The concierge is a friend of mine. I will telephone him that you will be there at nine o'clock to-night. I can give you a key of the flat. Luckily, I have one in my handbag."

She opened her handbag and gave Duplessis the key.

"Oh!" She gave a little exclamation. "Here is something else too. Here is an exact replica of the leather case in which the bonds are. I had it made for my unsuccessful burglar to leave in place of the other one, so that my brother should not miss it too quickly. Will you take this and leave it in the place of the one which you take out of the safe? And then if you do open the safe, do you think you can bring my bonds to me at the Hotel Continental? I shall be there at ten o'clock. And perhaps," continued Roanne, with a positively devastating glance, "you might care to have supper with me."

Duplessis agreed to everything. By this time, like many much cleverer men, he was head-over-heels in love with the exquisite Roanne. And when the train arrived at the Gare du Nord he was congratulating himself on being lucky enough to be able to do her a service.

On the station she bade him an affectionate farewell and got into a large car which awaited her. Duplessis watched the car until it disappeared in the dusk.

Two hundred yards from the station Roanne's car pulled up. Maltazzi jumped from a following taxicab. He hurried to Roanne's car, opened the door and smiled at her. She sat back in the corner, wrapped in her cloak. Her eyes were shining.

"Well?" asked Maltazzi.

"My friend," said Roanne, "it worked. This Duplessis was easy. At nine o'clock he will go to the flat and open the safe. Therefore

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the occupant of the flat, Bayarde, who would guard those papers with his life, must somehow be removed. You must find a way to do that."

"Easy," said Maltazzi. "It has been arranged that I call on Bayarde to-night with reference to some business in which he is interested in Paris. I am supposed to be one Gauteuil, a commercial traveller."

Roanne laughed. "Maltazzi," she said, "you don't look very much like a commercial traveller, but if you put on your hat a little straight, and get your shoes dusty, and—yes!—take my suitcase, you will probably look the part much more; but please return my suitcase carefully—my evening gowns are in it."

Maltazzi nodded and picked up the case from the floor of the car. "Easy," he said again. "When I get into the flat I shall ask Bayarde to examine some papers. As he does so I shall press a wad, soaked in chloroform, over his nose. There is no one else in the flat and I shall drag him into the next flat, which belongs to one of my men. He will see that Bayarde remains there sleeping quietly until our friend Duplessis has done his work."

"Excellent," said Roanne.

Maltazzi nodded and lit a cigarette.

"It is all very well, mademoiselle," he continued. "I can arrange all that easily enough, but supposing this innocent Duplessis takes it into his head, after he has opened the safe, to examine the papers. He will quickly discover that, far from being bonds, they are copies of two important secret treaties. What will he do then? Why obviously, he will take them to his own chief in Paris and all our troubles will have been for nothing. What a curse it is that I could not get that safe open myself!"

"I've thought of all that," replied Roanne. "It's quite possible our charming Duplessis will examine the papers, in which event he would, as you say, take them straight off to his chief. It is even possible that he will report to his chief this evening. If so, he would be told that he has been sent for by his own service to open the identical safe in the *rue Clichy* in order that Britain may have these papers, and then the affair will become a little difficult; but I'm hoping he will be so inspired by my distress over my wicked brother"—here

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Roanne laughed softly—"that he will put off reporting to his chief until to-morrow. With regard to the second point, that he examines the papers when he *has* opened the safe, that, my friend, must be dealt with by you."

"How?" asked Maltazzi.

"Easily enough," said Roanne. "When Duplessis leaves the flat in the *rue Clichy* to-night it will be quite dark. He must be set on by three or four *apaches*. They will take everything on him, papers, watch, chain, money, everything. It will look like an ordinary robbery. We shall in any event get the papers, and all that remains for my poor Duplessis to do is to come to me at ten o'clock, with tears in his nice eyes, and to inform me that, after actually getting my bonds from my wicked brother's safe, they have been stolen from him on the street. Quite simple, isn't it?"

Maltazzi laughed. "You're a clever woman, Roanne," he said, looking at her with sincere admiration. "I can arrange that. It will be dark when he comes out, and as there have been one or two robberies in the neighbourhood of the *rue Clichy* during the last week, no one will think anything of it."

"Excellent!" said Roanne. "But one thing, Maltazzi. My nice Duplessis must not be hurt. I shouldn't like that. He was so kind to me. He got tea for me, and patted my hand, and was so sympathetic."

Maltazzi smiled again. "Rest assured, mademoiselle," he said, "we shall not hurt him. I will promise you that."

He raised his hat and, quite pleased with himself, disappeared into the crowd. He would not have been so pleased had he realised that in the business of chloroforming the unfortunate Bayarde he, Maltazzi, would forget Roanne's suitcase and leave it on the floor in the corner of Bayarde's sitting-room. All of which goes to prove that the cleverest international agent, like the most foolish criminal, can make a mistake.

### III

Duplessis, having watched Roanne's car out of sight, took a cab and went straight to the rooms where he stayed when in Paris, near the *Grand Boulevard Montmartre*.

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Roanne had made one mistake in assessing Duplessis's character. He was not the type of man to disregard his duty, and his first business, after dumping his attaché-case in the corner, was to ring up Slavin—who was at that time Chief of the British Service in Paris—and to ask him whether he was wanted immediately.

"Oh no, Duplessis," said Slavin cheerily on the telephone. "I want you to do a job for me, but it can easily wait until to-morrow. Still, I'd like to talk it over with you, so perhaps you will come round to my place about ten to-night."

Duplessis said he would. He thought that he could have the little business in the *rue Clichy* finished at nine-thirty, dash round to Slavin, hear what he had to say, and then make straight for the Hotel Continental and Roanne.

The very thought of Roanne stirred Duplessis. Dimly, in some remote place at the back of his mind, a vague idea of marrying Roanne was germinating. How he was going to do this he had not the remotest notion, but the idea was there. He realised also that the first step towards making this vague idea a little more practical was to carry through successfully the business of returning to Roanne her bonds.

He bathed, put on a dinner-suit, ate an excellent dinner, and at ten minutes to nine, having put his little kitbag of tools, most of which were his own inventions, into the pocket of his overcoat, he took a taxi to the *rue Clichy*.

He paid off the cab on this side of Zélie's and walked slowly towards his destination, examining the houses carefully. Soon he realised that a postcard-seller, whom he had noticed when he got out of his cab, was sidling behind him. The man whispered hoarsely in his ear: "M'sieu, everything is arranged. Mademoiselle's brother is out and the concierge has been amenable to reason. It is the first-floor flat; your way is clear before you. *Bonne chance*, M'sieu!"

Duplessis nodded, and walked on. He turned casually into the entrance to Number Thirty-seven, acknowledged the greeting of the concierge and ran quickly up the stairs. The front door of the flat yielded easily to his key. He looked quickly through the rooms until he found the safe. Then he switched on the light and set to work.

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Opening that safe was one of the toughest jobs which Duplessis had ever experienced. It took twenty-five minutes' hard work and it was nearly half-past nine as he swung the ponderous door open. Before him, on the steel shelf of the safe, lay the leathern wallet, the exact duplicate of the dummy in his pocket. He had put out his hand for it when his observant eye fell on something in the corner—something which made him start. In the corner of the room was a very ordinary suitcase; *but* the corner of this suitcase was torn. Duplessis immediately recognised it as Roanne's case, which the clumsy porter had torn when putting it into the railway carriage at Dieppe.

I have said that Duplessis was not an extraordinarily clever man but, very naturally, he asked himself why this case should be in the flat. Why, for some unknown reason, should this case, part of Roanne's luggage—which should have gone with her straight to her hotel—be in this flat in the *rue Clichy*? Either Roanne had been there herself or someone else had brought it there. Was it likely that Roanne, who was such bad friends with her brother, would come round to the flat, and, if she did, leave her attaché-case there?

Duplessis's eye fell on the clock on the mantelpiece. It was twenty to ten. He remembered his appointment with Slavin. The very thought of Slavin suggested something to Duplessis. The idea came to him, for the first time, that Roanne was not all that she seemed and that, possibly, he had walked into a trap.

He tiptoed out of the flat and looked down the stairs. The concierge was deep in conversation with two rough-looking individuals, one of whom was the man who had told Duplessis that the way was clear in the *rue Clichy*. Then Duplessis realised that when he got outside he would probably be set upon and the wallet stolen.

There was a telephone in the corner of the room, but he knew that it was no use telephoning the police. It isn't usual for employees of the Secret Service to get mixed up in foreign police courts. Suddenly the whole thing became clear to Duplessis. Slavin wanted those documents in the safe! And Duplessis had been sent over to Paris because he was the only man who could open it. These other people, whoever they were, wanted them too. And he, like a fool, had walked straight into the trap that had been laid for him.

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For some minutes Duplessis stood in the middle of the room, thinking deeply. Then he walked over to the attaché-case and opened it. In it were three evening gowns. Their filminess and the suggestion of perfume which greeted Duplessis' nostrils reminded him vividly of Roanne.

An idea came to him and he laughed quietly to himself. Then he went to the telephone, found the number of the Hotel Continental, rang up the hotel and asked for Mademoiselle d'Enverde. A few minutes later the sound of Roanne's soft voice came to him over the telephone.

"Mademoiselle," said Duplessis, "I am delighted to tell you that I have just opened the safe and that the leather wallet containing your bonds, which, of course, I have not opened, is in my hands."

"Excellent!" said Roanne softly. "I am so indebted to you, Monsieur Duplessis—my dear Monsieur Duplessis—how can I ever repay you?"

"Quite easily, mademoiselle," replied Duplessis. "I have been thinking. You remember you said that I might come to you for supper. Would it be asking too great a reward for my services if I asked you to have supper with me at ten-thirty at the Café de la Paix? If that is agreeable I will call for you at ten-fifteen."

"But how I should love that, my friend," said Roanne. "But, alas! I have no evening gowns . . ." Duplessis's heart leapt when he heard this. "Do you mind if I come in a day gown?"

"Mademoiselle," said Duplessis, "I am terribly disappointed. You see, I think that I am very fond of you, and all the while I was working on this safe I had a little picture in my mind, a picture of us supping together, with you wearing the most wonderful evening gown. I thought," said Duplessis, "that it would probably be a black one. I am certain you would look so nice in black. . . ." He remembered the black gown in the attaché-case.

Roanne laughed. "Very well, my friend," she said, "you have deserved well. I will wear a black evening gown. It is a little inconvenient because my evening gowns are not here, but I will send for them. Nothing is too much trouble for you, my good friend."

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Duplessis murmured suitable thanks, said "*Au revoir*", and hung up the receiver. Five minutes later, having shut the safe door, he noisily descended the stairs, said "Good night" to the concierge, and turned into the *rue Clichy*. Seven minutes later a very burly individual, coming suddenly out of a side street, neatly tripped Mr. Duplessis. With great promptitude four other individuals who appeared out of the shadows which abound in the *rue Clichy* held him down and very systematically relieved him of everything in his possession, including his tiepin. They then disappeared as quickly as they came.

Duplessis got up, brushed himself, and, with a beatific smile, got the first cab which appeared. In it he drove straight round to Slavin who, when he had heard Duplessis's story, laughed long and loudly; and that, if you know anything about Mr. Slavin, was a very strange thing.

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### IV

At ten minutes past ten Duplessis called at the Hotel Continental.

Roanne received him smilingly, but, as he shook hands with her, Duplessis's face was a picture of abject misery.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I do not know how to tell you the terrible news. I hope you will understand. When I left the apartment in the *rue Clichy* to-night I was set upon by *apaches*. They took everything that I had, including the wallet with your bonds in it. I would have rung you up sooner, but I could not bear the thought of your disappointment."

Roanne smiled. She was looking utterly delicious in a black evening gown—the top one in the attaché-case, Duplessis noted with satisfaction.

"My poor friend," she said, "do not be concerned on my account. Naturally, I am sorry that the bonds are lost, but since I last saw you certain business has taken place which will mean that I am to receive a large sum of money. Therefore do not let us think any more about these bonds which have been the cause of so much trouble. Let us go and sup and talk about more pleasant things. For you must know," said Roanne admiringly, "I am beginning to feel quite an affection for you."

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And this was true. In spite of her varied acquaintance amongst some of the cleverest men in Europe, Roanne really felt herself attracted to this rather quiet and straight-forward Englishman, this specialist in opening reluctant safes of whom she had made such good use.

At this moment the telephone rang loudly. Roanne, with a murmured excuse, went to it. After a moment's conversation she called through the door leading from the sitting-room, in which they were, to her bedroom. "Marie, there is somebody downstairs, a Monsieur Leblanc who insists on speaking to me personally on an urgent matter. I don't know him, and I don't want him up here. Go down and see what he wants."

The maid went off, and Duplessis smiled to himself.

Two minutes afterwards the maid returned and informed Roanne that Monsieur Leblanc was sorry, but that he must see her personally. It was a matter of the utmost urgency, and Roanne, with apologies to Duplessis, went downstairs.

Immediately she had gone Duplessis turned to the maid. "How silly of me," he said, "I have just remembered. The Monsieur Leblanc downstairs wishes to see me, and, knowing that I should be with mademoiselle, he has probably asked for her by mistake. Run after her and explain. And tell him he must come and see me to-morrow morning."

The maid, looking rather surprised, went off. As the door closed behind her, Duplessis dashed across the room and into Roanne's bedroom, from which he emerged in time to seat himself in his original chair as Roanne and her maid returned.

As they sat over their coffee, Roanne watched Duplessis covertly. She felt that he would make a nervous confession of love at any moment, a process to which she was quite accustomed, for most men proposed to Roanne at some time or other.

But she found herself rather interested in the forthcoming avowal from Duplessis. She felt that it would be different. He looked troubled and his hand, holding the coffee-spoon, trembled a little.

Eventually he spoke, and she, with a little inward and gratified



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sigh—in which women indulge on these occasions—braced herself to listen with much pleasure. Her surprise grew as Duplessis continued speaking.

“Mademoiselle Loranoff,” said Duplessis—she sat back a little at that. So he knew her name!—“I am very unhappy because I am very fond of you and I feel that the news I have to break to you will make you hate me. However, I will tell you at once that the wallet, which your friends took from me on the *rue Clichy* this evening, is the dummy one which you yourself gave me. . . .”

Roanne smiled a little. She was a good loser.

“So . . .” she murmured, “and the real one?”

“By this time safe at the British Embassy,” said Duplessis. “You see, mademoiselle, I am not at all a clever man. When I received instructions to report here, I could not guess that it was to open that safe of Bayarde’s in order that my own people might get hold of those plans. I believed your story and was keen to help you, because I had already become interested in you . . .”

Roanne’s eyes were glistening.

“How did you get the papers away from the flat in the *rue Clichy*?” she asked.

Duplessis grinned. “That was quite easy,” he said. “You see, the first thing that aroused my suspicions was your suitcase in Bayarde’s flat. When you left me at the Gare du Nord it was put into your car. I noticed this. Directly I saw it at the flat I recognised it because I had seen the porter tear the corner slightly getting it into the carriage at Dieppe. Then I began to suspect you and when I saw the concierge whispering with the man who had spoken to me in the *rue Clichy* I thought that I should probably be set on directly I got out of the flat.

“Therefore, having discovered that your evening gowns were in the suitcase and that the top one was black. I telephoned you, and asked you to wear an evening gown, knowing that you would probably send round for the case. I then hid the real wallet in the empty pocket in the lid of the suitcase, and put the dummy in my pocket. As I thought, you sent round for the suitcase. You remember the mysterious Monsieur Leblanc who called to see you while I was with you at the Continental? Well, this was a young gentleman in the

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employ of our service here, and I used him to get both you and your maid out of your suite while I went into your room and took the wallet from the suitcase which lay open on your bed.

"The Embassy messenger was awaiting me here in the cloak-room when I arrived with you, and I handed him the wallet."

Duplessis looked at her. He looked thoroughly miserable. Roanne, looking into his eyes, came to the conclusion that Duplessis was a thoroughly sound Englishman and that he was not half such a fool as he liked to pretend.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle," said Duplessis, "that you have lost this little game. I am a loser too."

Roanne smiled and her eyes were very soft. Remember that she was very much of a woman and that Duplessis was the first man to outwit her.

"M'sieu Duplessis," she said, "you are the only man who has ever beaten me at my own game. I think that I like being outwitted—the experience is new. But you must be punished. I shall, therefore, marry you! Well——?"

It took Duplessis five minutes to recover his breath and another twenty to be persuaded that Roanne was speaking the truth. When he told Slavin the next morning that worthy refused, point blank, to believe him.

But the fact remains that "Roanne Lucrezia Loranoff," sometime Princess Roanne Lucrezi Demiroff, and now Mrs. John Duplessis, lives in an attractive villa between Nimes and Avignon, and awaits the periodic return of her spouse who, in the intervals of feeding chickens, occasionally points out how clever she is, and what an awful fool she must think him.

When they ask Duplessis—in the little room upstairs at Père Benoit's, in Ostend—how he got Roanne to marry him, he says he doesn't know.

And, strangely enough, although no one believes him, he doesn't!

## COMPTON MACKENZIE

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### *Water on the Brain*

Colònel Nutting offered Blenkinsop a cigar and after lighting one for himself took his seat at the desk.

"Pull up that armchair, Blenkinsop," he said, "and make yourself comfortable. You don't mind if I sit at my desk? I find my ideas are clearer when I'm sitting at my desk."

With this he put on his dark horn-rimmed spectacles and stared fixedly at his brother officer for the space of fully a minute.

"First and foremost," he began at last, "let me say I believe you are going to be the ideal man to succeed Hubert Chancellor. I believe the D.E.I. told you about that unfortunate business?"

"About his writing a novel?"

"Exactly. He wrote a novel called *The Foreign Agent* which might have smashed up the whole of the Secret Service."

"Surely he didn't give away any of the secrets?" Blenkinsop exclaimed in horror.

"He did what was almost as bad," said Colonel Nutting. "He wrote what he honestly thought was a completely misleading picture of the Secret Service as it really is. The consequence is that any foreign agent who reads Chancellor's novel knows perfectly well now what the British Secret Service is not, and to know what it is not is half-way to knowing what it is."

"Quite," Blenkinsop agreed. "But then don't lots of novelists write stories about the Secret Service? I was reading one coming over. It was called *The Green-Eyed Spy*."

"But the author of that isn't in the Secret Service himself," Colonel Nutting pointed out.

"Quite, quite," said Blenkinsop. "But would a foreign agent know that?"

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"Ah, but Hubert Chancellor's name is printed in the *War Office Guide* under M.Q.99 (E)."

"Isn't that a bit risky?"

"Not at all. Nobody knows what M.Q.99 (E) means. You see, if Chancellor was still on the active list and if he told people he was working in the War Office they would ask him what he was doing, and he would be able to say that he was working in M.Q.99 (E). It offers what we call a convenient cover."

"But suppose people tried to find out what working in M.Q.99 (E) meant?"

"That's where the Safety of the Realm Division comes in. Old P, who is the D.S.R.D., has a special set of sleuths who devote the whole of their time to preventing people from finding out what M.Q.99 (E) means. Of course, now that Chancellor has published this novel we shan't be able to use M.Q.99 (E) any longer, and in the next *War Office Guide* we shall have to find another convenient method of reference."

"Is your name in the *War Office Guide*?"

"No, because I'm on the retired list and people don't ask an officer on the retired list what he's doing. They take it for granted that he's playing golf."

"Quite, quite."

"That's why I'm glad you're on the retired list," Blenkinsop. It means we can keep your name out of the *War Office Guide*."

"But I don't think golf will be enough cover for me," Blenkinsop objected. "I mean to say my wife knows I'm not at all keen on golf and . . ."

"Oh, you're married, are you?" said Colonel Nutting in what Blenkinsop feared was a disappointed voice. "Oh well, it can't be helped, and I dare say you'll be getting divorced quite soon," he added cheerily.

"Still, I've already arranged for a convenient cover," Blenkinsop explained.

"Ah, what's that? It must be impenetrable. If your wife finds out you're in the Secret Service you might as well go and announce it over the wireless. By gad! By gad, yes! Why didn't I ever think of that before? Oh, it's a great idea!"

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"What?"

"Why, we've never used the B.B.C. for espionage yet. Oh, it's terrific. By Jove, what a development it suggests! Look here, Blenkinsop, I don't care if you're married or not. You're going to join us. You've given me the finest idea I ever had for espionage."

"Oh, but it was your idea," Blenkinsop disclaimed modestly.

"Yes, but if you hadn't been married I should never have thought of it."

"But to return to the question of a convenient cover," Blenkinsop ventured. "I have more or less arranged for one, sir."

Now that Blenkinsop felt sure of his engagement in the Secret Service he called his superior officer "sir" by reflex action. His tongue formed the word automatically as the salivary glands of a dog respond to the sight of a bone.

Colonel Nutting held up a warning hand.

"N, not sir, Blenkinsop. We avoid any suggestion of rank in our work. One of the important things about it is not to let any foreign agent guess who is the head of the Secret Service. After all, war may break out any moment, and if the head of the Secret Service is known what chance do we stand against the enemy?"

"All right, N, I won't forget," Blenkinsop promised, with a hint of self-consciousness in his tone.

"That's it," N encouraged, "you'll soon get used to calling people by their initials. But you were saying something about a convenient cover when I interrupted you."

"Of course, I don't know how the notion will appear to you, but it would be quite easy for me to be the director of a company for exploiting the waste products of the banana. In fact I've already tried that on my wife. And she seemed to think it was quite a natural occupation for me."

"Capital!" N declared enthusiastically. "Couldn't be better. That's one of the most convenient covers I've ever come across. Look here, Blenkinsop, you're going to be invaluable to us. I ought to warn you, though, that our work doesn't consist entirely of meeting mysterious Polish countesses in old castles. Of course, we have our little dramas, but the greater part of the work is routine stuff. Card-indexing, filing, making out lists, putting agents' reports

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into proper English. We have a house in Hampstead. Do you know the Spaniards Road? Well, on the left-hand side going down toward the Bull and Bush, there's a large house which we call The Elms among ourselves, but which is really called Pomona Lodge. It stands back from the road in its own grounds. Absolutely secluded. We might be in the depths of the country. That's our headquarters. And do be careful when you come there. If you have to come by taxi never take fewer than two taxis, and always give a false address in a loud voice to the first taxi-driver. However, come by tube or by train and tube fairly often. And if you've reason to suppose you're being followed get out at some station like Goodge Street which is pretty empty. And if you notice somebody else getting out with you and hanging about, leave the station and find some excuse for having got out at Goodge Street."

"That will be a bit difficult," said Blenkinsop.

"Oh, I don't know, you can always go and buy a bit of furniture in Tottenham Court Road. You can always charge up anything like that if you can show it was bought for cover. Don't do it too often of course, because we can never get as much money as we want. I put up a scheme the other day for constructing a secret passage under the Heath from a house in Golders Green to The Elms, but it was turned down on the score of expense. A pity, because it does take up time getting our people to The Elms without being spotted by foreign agents. However, luckily the S.R.D. sleuths under P are regular tigers. And now let's talk about Mendacia. I don't have to tell you that Mendacia is the danger spot to European peace. You see, everybody wants it."

"Yes, we found that when we were working on the boundaries after Versailles," Blenkinsop agreed.

"So you see the main problem is to keep ourselves informed what other people are doing in Mendacia. We don't want to go blundering into the next war at the last minute as we blundered into the last one. As Chief of the Secret Service I want to be in a position to tell the Government that war will break out at least six months before it really does."

"Yes, but will the Government believe it?" Blenkinsop questioned. "I know when we were working on the Boundary Com-

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mission, the Government never believed anything we told them. And if the Government in power is a Labour Government they'll do anything to avoid a war."

"That's taking rather a pessimistic view. There may not be a Labour Government. I think the patriotism of the country was thoroughly roused when the pound fell. And you must remember that all the cleverest politicians joined the National Government. That seems to me a tremendous sign of confidence in its stability. No, I think we can count on a Government that will envisage the possibility of war. Now Clavering, our Minister in Gadaro, is, as you probably know, very much against the restoration of King Johannis to the throne of Mendacia. The Venetians accuse him of being pro-Burgundian. I don't believe that myself. I think he's one of these sentimental radicals who think any republic is better than a monarchy. Clavering has always pooh-poohed the chances of a royal restoration. Our job is to find out if Clavering is right. Personally, I don't believe he is. In my opinion the Mendacians themselves are waiting to see if Clavering's point of view is really the point of view of the British Government. So you see what your job is?"

Blenkinsop did not in the least see what his job was; but he nodded gravely and looked as wise as he could without the help of a pair of dark horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Now, first of all about your organization. I don't want you to feel bound to take on Chancellor's organization, lock, stock, and barrel. I suppose there's no chance of opening that hotel again on the island of Parvo?"

Blenkinsop shook his head.

"Not without a good deal more capital. My brother made up his mind to cut his losses."

"What was it losing a week roughly at the end?"

"About nine thousand bubas a week."

"What's that in pounds?"

"Well, at the rate of exchange then, about ninety pounds a week."

"No, I don't think we could run to that," said N. "I'd been wondering if we could finance the business out of the funds at my disposal just to keep it afloat. But I couldn't run to that. It's a pity,

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because it would have made such a very convenient cover. Suppose all the hotel staff were agents? We could save a bit that way."

"Yes, but they couldn't very well do their hotel work and go spying about all over Mendacia at the same time," Blenkinsop objected.

"I say, don't use that word, if you don't mind, when you're talking about our own people. We only use it of foreign agents. It may not seem to you important, but it's just these little things that make the wheels of the show go round smoothly. There's always a slight stigma attached to that word, and since the war we've really worked up a rather jolly pull-together spirit in the Secret Service. Some of the fellows who were in it during the war were apt to think that because they were in the Secret Service they could forget they were once gentlemen. Well, of course, they let in a lot of confounded amateurs, who had no traditions, no discipline, no anything. As a matter of fact, in ordinary conversation, we always call the work 'plumbing' and in writing reports we say that an agent ascertained. We have three grades of agents—very reliable, reliable, and usually reliable."

"What about an agent who isn't reliable at all?"

"Well, he would cease to be employed; but we count on the various fellows in charge of the various countries—who are all pukka soldiers now—not to employ an unreliable agent. Of course, that doesn't say an odd agent might not make a few mistakes now and then, but he'd have to be pretty bad not to be 'usually reliable'. Still, I see your point of view about the difficulty of running an hotel with even usually reliable agents, and equally your difficulty in running an efficient subsection of information with what you would consider even usually reliable hotel servants. Mendacia by the way is a subsection of the South-East Europe Section, which is under Claudie Hunter-Hunt. Did you ever meet him? He was in the Rutland Fusiliers."

Blenkinsop shook his head.

"Well, you'll find HH a great man," N declared. "He'll be disappointed to hear that it isn't practical to start that hotel again on Parvo. But what *are* you doing with the place?"

"Oh, there's just a caretaker and his family living in the castle.



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People occasionally make excursions there from Gadaro, and he's allowed to sell them refreshments."

"So that in case of need we *could* use it as a cistern."

"As a what?"

"A cistern is a centre of information."

"Oh, I think that could be arranged."

"You see, we might want you to go out to Mendacia, and with the hotel you've always got a capital cover. However, that will depend on developments. The important matter is to establish contact at once with Madame Tekta."

"With Madame Tekta?" Blenkinsop repeated. "You don't mean *the* Madame Tekta?"

"The wife of the last Prime Minister of Mendacia under the Royalists. I see you know something about her?" N said, his light-blue eyes flashing through the horn-rimmed spectacles with a power of penetration that revealed him as an Intelligence officer of the very front rank.

"I've never actually met her," Blenkinsop explained. "But her name was a byword in Mendacia."

"She is said to possess a fatal charm," said N gravely, "to have been the cause of six suicides, innumerable duels, and her husband's banishment."

"There certainly was a lot of unpleasant gossip about her," Blenkinsop agreed. "In fact when old Tekta threw himself overboard from the Mendacian cruiser that was taking him to Trieste after he was booted out, everybody was saying that his wife pushed him into the Adriatic with the help of one of the junior officers who was in love with her."

"That was never confirmed, but undoubtedly she is a very remarkable woman. She has more ways of finding out what is really going on in Mendacia than anybody, and she knows what King Johannis means to do. We approached her very carefully to find out if she would work for us, and at last it was fixed up for Chancellor to establish contact with her this evening. In the ordinary course of events I am absolutely against employing women in our work. For counter-espionage a woman may be useful. In espionage she is always a source of potential weakness. Mademoiselle quarrels

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with her lover, a foreign aviator, engineer, clerk in a government office, anything you like. She meets an agent on the look out for useful information. Anxious to be revenged on her lover she tells him all the gossip she has heard. The agent thinks he has tumbled on a good thing. Next day Mademoiselle makes it up with her lover and to show her goodwill gives away the agent. Result? Arrest of agent, possible trial for espionage, a stink in the newspapers, and general unpleasantness all round. On the other hand if Mademoiselle's lover is himself a foreign agent and is foolish enough to quarrel with her she gives him away to the police and it's too late then to make up the quarrel. So keep off women, Blenkinsop, in your work. I'll back you up whatever other mistakes you make, but if you start employing women I'll not put out a hand to get you out of any mess you get yourself into."

"But is it wise to use Madame Tekta?" Blenkinsop asked nervously. It was going to be difficult enough to keep Enid quiet even with the help of the banana directorship; if she were to suspect another woman all the bananas in the world would not avail to cover him.

"I've thought over it a lot," said N. "I've given the proposal a great deal of anxious thought, and if I have decided to make an exception in this case it is only because I feel the situation in Mendacia justifies a risk I would not ordinarily authorize. Madame Tekta is herself the storm-centre."

The Chief of the Secret Service stopped and took another long look at his new officer.

"Look here, Blenkinsop," he said at last, "I don't believe in letting a man in for a job of this sort wearing blinkers. If King Johannis makes an attempt to regain the throne, and we stand on one side it may easily mean another European war. But if we satisfy ourselves that the people of Mendacia really want their king back we can give him moral support, in which case the Burgundians will realize that it isn't just a matter of quarrelling with the Venetians. I'm going to give you a piece of absolutely confidential secret information. The other day the Foreign Secretary himself sent for me just before he started off for the Eighty-Ninth Disarmament Conference at Geneva and said: 'Colonel, it's vital for me to know what the situation in Mendacia really is.' Now the Foreign Secre-

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tary usually pretends he doesn't know there is such a person as the Chief of the Secret Service, and his sending for me like that shows that Sir Thomas Freshcote is the best Foreign Secretary our country has had for years. And he knows which side his own bread is buttered. I respect him for that. We want practical men at Geneva, not idealists. After all, Blenkinsop, we are still on earth."

"Quite," the dragoon agreed.

"So when we've got a practical man on the job we want to take advantage of it, and for that reason I'm going to take a sporting chance with Madame Tekta. The immediate problem is whether to let the lady know who you are or whether to let her think you're Chancellor."

"I don't see much point in letting her think I'm somebody else," said Blenkinsop. If he had to make his wife think he was a banana director and at the same time to delude Madame Tekta into supposing that he was his predecessor, Blenkinsop began to feel doubtful of his ability to do anything else in the near future.

"Well, it might be useful," N said. "If Madame T . . . Look here, we must find another name for her. Juno will do. We'll call her Juno. If Juno . . ."

"Is she a very large woman then?" Blenkinsop inquired apprehensively.

"I've never seen her in the flesh; but her photographs don't give that impression."

"That's what I was thinking, and Juno always suggests a largish woman to me."

"Well, I don't mind what we call her," said N agreeably. "We'll call her Venus if you prefer it. She's your pigeon."

"No, no, don't let's call her Venus," said Blenkinsop quickly. "Let's call her Joan of Arc. I think that's less suggestive."

"Suggestive of what?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. We'll call her Juno. I'm sorry I interrupted."

"What I was going to say was that if Juno double-crossed us and there was any kind of scandal . . ."

"Of scandal?" Blenkinsop asked with the hint of a quaver in his usually unemotional voice.

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"We have to face such an eventuality," said N firmly. "If there is any kind of scandal Hubert Chancellor can be disowned absolutely."

"Yes, but what will Chancellor's wife . . . I mean, what will Chancellor say?"

"Chancellor has made his bed by writing that confounded novel, though indirectly it has not been without its uses. Juno is very interested in literature. Women often are, of course."

"Well, they have a lot of time on their hands," said Blenkinsop, who was always chivalrous. "My wife's a tremendous reader."

"And when Juno agreed to meet Chancellor this evening she mentioned how much she looked forward to discussing his novel."

"But I can't go to Madame Tekta as . . ."

"Juno. Juno! You *must* remember never to call her Madame Tekta when you're talking about her."

"I can't go to Juno and start spouting a lot of rot about books. I've only met one novelist in my life, and I was pumping him about bananas all the time. So I didn't get much idea of the way that kind of fellow talks when he's spouting about books."

"I've met one or two," said N reassuringly. "You know, at weekends and that sort of thing. They're getting quite common nowadays. You see them everywhere since the war. It didn't change Chancellor a bit outwardly, writing this novel of his. Of course, it may begin to tell on him after he's written one or two more."

"Look here, N, unless you're absolutely set on my meeting Juno as Chancellor I'd much rather meet her as myself," Blenkinsop urged.

"No, you simply must not be yourself. She expects Chancellor to dine with her tonight in her flat, and if at the last moment I send a friend—by the way don't forget that in our work a friend always means a confidential agent—if I send a friend to tell her that somebody called Blenkinsop is coming instead she might call the whole deal off. I've just signalled all friends in Paris to keep away from me on account of Katzenschlosser. Oh, from every point of view, you'd better be Chancellor. It's really the greatest bit of luck that you should be able to take advantage of such a convenient cover."

"Well, I'll do my best," Blenkinsop promised gloomily. "But I'd like to know exactly what you want me to say at this interview."

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"I just want you to establish contact. Get on good terms with the lady. I gather that isn't too difficult, though you'll want to keep a cool head. I'm told she's a real scorcher. Dandle her along. You know the sort of thing. She'll probably ask for a larger regular salary. We're paying her a thousand francs a week as a start. Tell her that if she gives us what we want we shall never be ungrateful. Impress on her that we only want the real goods. No nonsense about guns and aeroplanes. We can find out all that sort of stuff without her help. And now you'll want to go off and think out a plan of campaign while you're dressing. Dinner is at eight. Here's her address—44 bis Avenue Delacour. That's somewhere up by the Parc Monceau. Take the usual precautions. Three taxis. Drive the first one to the Louvre. Then take another and drive to the Folies Bergère. Then take a third, and just for an added precaution give him the wrong number. I'm travelling back to London tonight by Havre. This Katzenschlosser business has made it impossible for me to do anything in Paris this time. Which way did you cross?"

"By Folkestone and Boulogne."

"You'd better go back by Newhaven and Dieppe."

"But I've got a return ticket."

"And that's the very reason for your going back by another route. You may think us over-cautious, Blenkinsop, but when you've been with us for a little while and have been stalked all over the place by foreign agents you'll get into the swing of it. It's great fun really, this matching your wits against the keenest wits in Europe and America. Only last summer George Spicer, who's in charge of Western Europe, spent two weeks in Seville disguised as a retired matador."

"Great Scott! He must speak Spanish awfully well," Blenkinsop exclaimed.

"Oh, like a native. But he was brought up there as a child. His people are in sherry. I'm great on disguises myself. My last effort was to travel right across Poland establishing contacts, disguised as a Liberal M.P. I'm pretty good at disguises. One of the chief C.I.D. men said it was lucky for Scotland Yard I went into the Secret Service instead of taking up crime. Well, so long, Blenkinsop. You'd better turn up at The Elms the day after tomorrow. You remember

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the real name of the house? Pomona Lodge. It's printed in white letters on a black gate. If one of P's sleuths slips out from the shrubbery and asks you what you want, tell him you've come to see about the drains. He'll pass you along at once. Ring four times and tell the orderly who opens the door that you want to see Miss Glidden. She's my secretary and will take you up to my room right away. Now is that all clear?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, so long, Blenkinsop, and get busy with Juno right away."

Blenkinsop walked out of that room on the second floor of the Hotel Plonplon not exactly with a profounder sense of his own importance, for he was innately diffident; but he felt within himself the first stirrings of a richer personality, and as he walked along the corridor toward the lift there was already in his gait a suggestion of stealth, in his glance a hint of preternatural acumen. He looked at his watch. Was there time to go and buy himself a pair of dark horn-rimmed spectacles? No, it would be wiser to wait until he got back to London. He doubted if his French was fluent enough to explain that he wanted plain glasses which, though they would add something to the size of the subject, would add nothing to the size of the object.

When he reached his own room Blenkinsop threw himself down in an armchair, and spent a quarter of an hour in awed contemplation of himself. He was an officer in the Secret Service entrusted with a mission of European significance.

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## *The Trial of Marius Derocq*

‘You ought not to believe all you read in the papers,’ said Papa Pontivy.

I was surprised at the mildness of his observation, for the paragraph was offensive. In England it would have provided excellent grounds for a libel action, but French journalists are notoriously a privileged class; they know how to exploit words, too, and by innuendo one can suggest what even they might hesitate to affirm in plain language.

“Of course I take credit for the work of my subordinates,” Pontivy continued, pursuing the theme of the paper’s somewhat acid complaint. “Does not a teacher take the credit when his pupils pass their examinations? Assuredly. And who taught my boys all they know about the art of counter-espionage? Me—Papa Pontivy! Ask them—they will not deny it.”

He was right there, for I knew that there was great competition among the junior officers of the Sûreté Nationale to be seconded to the entourage of Papa Pontivy. Yet he chose his assistants from a wider field. He drew as freely on the brains of the Deuxième Bureau as they did on his—most of his cases were concerned with their affairs. He recruited his agents from sources sometimes astonishing, but he seldom made a mistake. I doubt if he could have spelled the word psychology at the first attempt, but he knew more about the minds of men than many learned professors.

I was staying with him at St. Etienne to see the final act in one of his cases. There was a tense atmosphere in the barrack room where the court martial was held after the passing of the new French law making treason punishable by death in peacetime—indeed, I believe it was actually the first. A concentrated stare was

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directed on the accused man as he was marched in. There had been some disquieting cases of espionage in France lately, and it was reasonably certain that if Adjutant Marius Derocq were found guilty, he would be shot *pour encourager les autres*.

There were two charges: of communicating official secrets to a foreign power; and—as if by one of those legal afterthoughts to make quite certain that the prisoner can be found guilty of something at least—of photographing within a forbidden zone.

I felt sorry for the miserable man. He may have been forty, but looked years older—a man of the quartermaster type, apparently, whose military life had been passed on the administrative side. The French rank of adjutant, I should explain, differs from ours—it is approximately equivalent to our first-class warrant officer.

His uniform emphasised his stoop: for long periods he hung his head, as if refusing to listen to the volume of evidence against him. From time to time his tongue sought to moisten his parched lips, in its passage giving a straggling appearance to his tawny moustache.

Papa Pontivy gave evidence first. He said that it had come to his notice—by what means he did not disclose and the president of the court martial wisely forbore to enquire—that a certain German had come into France and had gone to St. Etienne. It was understood that there was nothing definite against this man, but he was suspect. He purported to be a commercial traveller and did actually travel the country and book a few orders for electric lamps and batteries. But every week or so he returned to St. Etienne.

It was a strange place for the headquarters of a commercial traveller, Papa Pontivy explained—unless you had a suspicious mind. For at St. Etienne were important armament works; in particular, there was one factory which was concentrated on the manufacture of the new Aiglou seaplane, which was one of the fastest in the world—as well as carrying the heaviest armament.

Because of this, Papa Pontivy continued, he had warned the firms concerned that they should exercise especial care. He had also sent one of his own officers, Sergeant Pradelles, to St. Etienne—he would not risk going himself, since the German knew him. With the court's permission, Sergeant Pradelles would now give evidence.



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I knew Pradelles well—one of the keenest of Pontivy's "boys". His evidence was clear and concise. From time to time I glanced at the accused man. His fingers wandered spasmodically through his tangled hair; at times I thought him dazed. Yet it was apparent that he realised the damning nature of Pradelles' evidence.

Pradelles told how he had watched the German during his visits to St. Etienne, but had failed to find anything incriminating. At the same time he had kept in touch with the armament firms which might be the agent's quarry, and in his third week made the startling discovery that the drawings of the Aiglon plane were being copied.

"How did you discover this?" demanded the president of the court martial.

"The drawings are on special paper—Bristol board, M. le President," Pradelles explained. "When they are made, they are of course pinned to a drawing-board. I discovered that someone else, without authority, was pinning the drawings to a board—and *he was using drawing-pins of a different size from the original, so that the holes were larger.*"

"That was exceedingly smart of you to have remarked that," said the president, passing to the other officers the sample pieces of Bristol board which Pradelles had produced to illustrate the difference in the diameter of the drawing-pin holes.

"I thank you, monsieur. That is my profession," Pradelles answered. "After that, my task was fairly easy. The manufacture of the seaplane is carried out under conditions of great secrecy. Naturally, thousands of men are concerned with its component parts, but not more than a dozen have access to all its secrets. I inquired into the private lives of these men, and eventually I found one who was living beyond his means."

"Ah!" I could understand the president's exclamation, for Pradelles had caught out the traitor by his most obvious failing.

"The prisoner, Adjutant Marius Deroq, had been employed at the works on behalf of the Ministry of War for two months. He was in charge of the clerical side, including accounts. But, among other things, it was his duty to register personally all drawings and only to issue them to authorised people."

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"I understand. And he was the man who was living above his income?"

"Yes, monsieur. I can bring evidence that he has been gambling heavily—far beyond his modest salary."

"He has no private means?"

"His bank knows of none, monsieur."

"Have you any evidence to connect the prisoner with the German agent to whom you referred?"

"Yes, monsieur. The moment suspicion was directed so definitely against him, naturally he was watched. Among the letters he sent was one addressed to the German agent at the *poste restante*."

"I see. A simple scheme for communications—yet one which might never have been discovered otherwise."

"Precisely, *M. le President*."

"And this letter contained?"

"Six photographic films. I do not propose to produce them, or prints from them, unless the prisoner demands, but it is sufficient to say that they were photographs of prints concerning features of the Aiglon plane."

"Adjutant Derocq, do you so demand?" asked the president, sternly. "You have the right, if you wish."

"No, *mon colonel*," said the prisoner, uneasily. The lack of lustre in his eyes betrayed despair.

"You realise what this means—it is an admission that you forwarded these films to this German?" the president demanded, determined that justice should be served. "And also that they were films of secret drawings or documents."

"I understand, *mon colonel*."

"Do you wish to ask any questions of this witness?"

"No, *mon colonel*."

"It is to be presumed, I suppose," the president put to Pradelles, "that the prisoner had made similar contacts with the German?"

"I am afraid so, *M. le President*."

"So that valuable secrets have been lost to France?"

"That is so." And with that Pradelles' evidence was concluded.

One or two other witnesses were called, to prove Derocq's gambling excesses, but he appeared scarcely interested. It seemed to me

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that he was hard pressed to control himself for the final moments of his ordeal.

"Adjutant Derocq, have you anything to say?" asked the president, when the last witness had been heard.

"No, *mon colonel*."

"You do not challenge their evidence?"

"How can I?" in a sudden despairing burst of defiance.

"Perhaps you are right. Yet you pleaded not guilty."

Derocq shrugged his shoulders, as if to indicate that his plea had been purely technical. Then I saw his fingers gripping the rail in front of him; but the moment was still to be postponed—the president knew the importance of this trial under the new law, and was determined that all provisions should be satisfied.

"The court will retire to consider its verdict," he announced.

Yet it was farcical, and but a further strain on the nerves of the doomed man. The trial had lasted less than an hour, but a clearer case I never encountered—the prisoner, indeed, by implication admitted his guilt. Once I was the junior officer on a British court martial, so had to give my verdict first. Then I was troubled—but I would have had no hesitation in the case of Adjutant Marius Derocq.

They marched him back into the room; by this time the nerves of his escort were also strained. I confess that I had to fight for control; although I knew what was coming, the scene had all the power of drama whose effect is cumulative because it is inevitable. The prisoner was deadly pale: I detected a slight tremor in his fingers, and his lips were betrayingly dry. Yet some relic of an older spirit returned to his aid at this critical moment, and he straightened his stoop as he faced the court.

"Adjutant Marius Derocq, the court has considered the evidence and has found you guilty. Have you anything to say before sentence is passed?"

"Only this, *mon colonel*," said Derocq, a slight stammer betraying his agitation; "the hope that my case will serve as a warning to others. Otherwise I must throw myself on the mercy of the court."

"Mercy! Is this a case for mercy? You, a soldier of France for twenty years, you sell for miserable, worthless gain a vital secret of

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France, and you ask for mercy! How is France to be defended if she has traitors among her own sons? There are no words which can describe the depths of your treachery. Miserable man, you——” but at this point the president perceived that Derocq was swaying, apparently about to faint. He halted for a moment, then abandoned his denunciation. “The sentence of the court on the first charge is that to-morrow you shall be paraded, degraded of your rank, and dismissed with ignominy from the army of France. On the following day, at dawn, you will be shot. On the second charge you are fined fifteen hundred francs.”

I could have shouted at the anticlimax, so acute was the tension. The French, a logical race, saw nothing untoward in fining a man eight pounds ten shillings and sixpence after they had condemned him to death.

“There’s one thing, Papa,” I said, after he and Pradelles had received the congratulations of the court; “it was a good case from your point of view, but it was a pity those plans got to Germany.”

“Don’t I know it!”

“I wonder the president did not comment further on this point.”

“Don’t worry. Some of the newspapers will! Fortunately I have an answer—that we caught Derocq before he had completed his treachery, so the plans are useless. It will not be true, but it will do for the newspapers.”

“I noticed that the points about the German were passed over very quickly.”

“Yes,” said Papa Pontivy. “They did not really concern the trial, as I pointed out previously to the president—and there was always the chance that, having succeeded once, he will come again.”

“A poor chance, surely, Papa,” I persisted. “He will read all about the trial, anyway.”

“Naturally! That was only my argument to the president.”

Somewhat to my surprise, he turned off the conversation abruptly, to return with equal suddenness the following morning, when he announced that we would witness the degradation of Derocq. I was not over-anxious. I did not pretend that he had not deserved his fate, for his treachery was of the blackest type. Yet I could still

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picture the despair in those lustreless eyes, and the tongue rolling round the parched lips.

However, I welcome any new experience, however nerve-racking, so went with Pontivy to the barracks. Three companies were on parade: Derocq was marched on under guard; his sentence was read, and an officer with scissors cut off his badges of rank. Another officer slit the seams of his tunic, so that it hung in pathetic, meaningless shreds from his shoulders. Marius Derocq was no longer a soldier of France.

He passed quite close to me as he was marched off, the drums beating a sombre motif like the accompaniment to a dirge of death. Derocq was still pale, but now that his fate was sealed he appeared to have recovered some of his composure. He marched firmly, his eyes staring in front of him. By a sudden instinct I believed his plea that he hoped his case would be a lesson to others: I felt that he would die bravely in this hope.

We took the night train to Paris. I had intended to continue to London but Papa Pontivy insisted: we must celebrate the successful conclusion of the case, he declared.

We dined at Pontivy's flat, which was unusual. However, the old man was something of a gourmet, and had fixed an excellent meal, with first-class company. Pradelles was there, with another man I had not previously met, named Bocquillon. He was charming company, witty—even brilliant; his face and hands were expressive and his face decidedly interesting. There was something familiar about his name, but I could not place its significance. He might be anybody. I never was surprised at any of Pontivy's acquaintances: at his table you might easily meet a cabinet minister or a dustman.

Yet there was more than this in my unforced attention: there was something reminiscent about Bocquillon. Something about his lips—and his eyes, which could never lie.

In a flash I had it. He was introduced to me as Henri Bocquillon—but I was prepared to wager that his real name was Derocq. Was he the son of the man who had just been shot? Probably not—the difference in age was scarcely sufficient: a brother, probably; of the family, certainly.

Instantly Pontivy's plan became clear. Like the president, he too

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had passed over the question of the German agent over-rapidly. Now he was going to sound the relative in order to complete his knowledge of the case—the destination of the plans, probably. The fact that Bocquillon's brother, or whatever his relationship was, had been shot would mean nothing to Papa Pontivy, who knew no mercy where the security of France was concerned.

"Well, have you got it?" Pontivy demanded suddenly, as we sat over our drinks. I followed his eyes to the smiling face of Bocquillon.

"I think so," I said hesitantly, amazed that he should reveal his plot.

"As you are an actor yourself, my dear Newman, you probably know M. Bocquillon's reputation," Pontivy continued. "He is the best character actor of the rising generation in France to-day."

Now I had it: of course the name was familiar.

"And I should say that he played the part of his life to-day," said Papa Pontivy warmly, patting him on the shoulder. "I thought his conduct at the trial admirable, and his march off the parade ground yesterday was magnificent."

"What?" I cried. "What do you say?"

"You said you had got it!" said Papa Pontivy. "You have not recognised that Henri Bocquillon was Marius Derocq?"

"Impossible! A relative, I had thought, but——"

Bocquillon had risen to his feet, his hands clutching the back of a chair. I saw the gentle tremble of his fingers. He dropped into a natural stoop; his tongue rolled round his lips, and his eyes stared ahead in apprehensive despair. He seemed to age ten years before my eyes. Only the drooping moustache was wanting; evidently it had been real, but temporary.

They laughed long and long at my discomfiture. But, of course, I demanded explanations.

"There *was* a German agent," Papa Pontivy chuckled, "and he was after the plans of the Aiglon machine. So I decided that he should have them! My own boys are good, but this part could only be played by an actor. Henri played it for two months—until the result you saw."

"But——"

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"He was easy prey for the German, who soon observed his gambling habits—incidentally, Henri, you must let me have a full account of your expenses. The Deuxième Bureau will pay—it does not ask so many inconvenient questions as the Sûreté Nationale."

"That's all right, Papa. Remember, I still have the money I received from Germany—less fifteen hundred francs!"

"So you have, my boy! Well, it was necessary to carry the drama to its conclusion to make certain that the Germans were absolutely convinced that they had the genuine plans."

"But surely it was dangerous, Papa. Not everyone is so competent an actor as M. Bocquillon. The president of the court martial, for example."

"*Peste!* He did not know—he was not acting—he thought it *was* a court martial. Nobody knows. Even his shooting was arranged. At St. Etienne they think he was shot at his depot, at the depot they think he was shot at St. Etienne."

"But these plans—I take it they were faked?"

"Your intelligence amazes me, my dear Newman!"

"I say, Papa, you're not trying to tell me that this is like the apocryphal story about the destroyer which the Italians built to stolen plans, and which sank as soon as it was launched!"

"Give me greater credit than that, my friend! Yes, the plans and specifications were faked, but with subtlety. Little things like gauges of metal were different—cleverly as to deceive an expert. What is more the Germans have been so misled by the thoroughness of our plans that they have put the seaplane into mass production immediately—they are not making the usual prototype, for they know already the worth of the plane and believe they have all its details. So they have already ordered the necessary parts for seven hundred machines."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, we have agents in Germany, you know!" Pontivy remarked, mildly.

"And the seaplanes—when the Germans have made them, will they fly?"

"Oh, yes. They will fly—I told you that the plans would pass an expert. *But they will not fly nearly so fast nor so long as the*

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*Germans think they will—as ours do.* They will be easy prey for our fighters.”

“But won’t the Germans find that out?”

“Yes, when a considerable part of their aircraft production has been diverted for months to their manufacture,” said Pontivy. “In this ‘white war’ we are fighting, this must be counted a victory. Well, Henri, the toast is to you!”

“To the late Marius Derocq!” Bocquillon corrected.

“You are right! To the late Marius Derocq!”

“I see his death by shooting is formally announced in to-night’s paper,” Bocquillon chuckled, pointing out the paragraph. “There is a leading article about patriotism and treachery; another about our ineffective counter-espionage service, which allows vital plans to be stolen by potential enemies.”

“That only shows that you ought not to believe all you read in the paper,” said Papa Pontivy.



GODFREY SMITH

## *The Flaw in the Crystal*

I had been sitting one lazy summer afternoon in the Office, drafting a paragraph within a section of a document, which, in conjunction with two or three hundred other documents, might one day prove of the greatest moment to my country, though I doubted it, personally. Suddenly my telephone rang, Shirley picked up the receiver.

"Mr. Meredith's Office."

A muted crackle from the other end. She put her hand over the mouthpiece, and said:

"It's Lacrymer House."

Lacrymer House was an annexe of ours, a recent acquisition, and something of a joke. It had no staff to speak of, and seemed to have no function. Certain correspondence went in there, and came out initialled in unfamiliar handwriting. Most people agreed that it was a rest home for jaded under-secretaries. Perhaps I was in line for a little promotion.

I picked up the receiver.

"Meredith speaking."

"Hold the line, please," said a girl's voice.

I doodled.

"Meredith?" asked a man's voice, after a few moments.

"Speaking."

"Ah, good afternoon, Meredith. This is Savile."

I sat up with a start.

"Good afternoon, sir."

"Look, Meredith, I wonder if you'd be good enough to step round here. You know the way?"

"I can find it. I'll be with you in five minutes, sir."

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"Excellent."

I replaced the receiver with care.

Shirley looked up questioningly.

"If anyone wants me," I said, "I'm with the Minister."

Shirley looked suitably impressed.

"But," I added, straightening my tie before our vast, gloomy mirror, "that's no reason for you to start giving yourself airs and graces in front of the other girls."

There was a pause which a less gallant man would have called pregnant.

"Perhaps they want you for the First Eleven, Mr. Meredith," she ventured icily.

I withdrew.

The heavy, drowsy scent of summer assailed me as I crossed the lawn. I hummed, and went with a sprightly step over the smooth green turf. I crossed the ornamental bridge, and so came up the level gravel drive of Lacrymer House. As usual, it seemed even more inert than our own department.

The Commissionaire I knew of old; he beamed on me and handed me over to the lift boy, and we groaned some four storeys upwards in his gilded cage. I was conducted along a corridor indistinguishable from miles of other corridors in other Government offices, and left in the hands of another underling. All this would have been terrifying if I had not known that the same procedure was usual in even the most unexciting departments.

My new escort knocked on a door and ushered me in.

In front of me was a wide, polished desk around which three men sat. In the middle was Savile. The other two were nothing to do with the Office, I was certain.

Savile gave me his nicest smile.

"Do sit down, Meredith," he said.

I sat down.

Savile shuffled some papers in front of him. Then he glanced quickly up.

"I'm so sorry. May I introduce Mr. Lockhart?"

I knew something of Lockhart. He was in his late forties, I supposed, gaunt, grey-haired, bespectacled, a little tense, with long,

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thin wrists protruding from frayed cuffs. He was a professional man of affairs—broadcaster, journalist, lecturer, Penguin-writer—they are a distinct and specialised class these days. He was clever. But surely he was left-wing?

"How do you do," said Lockhart, as if he were trying to finish an acrostic in his head.

"How do you do."

"And this is Mr. Tarnleigh."

Tarnleigh also I knew about. He, too, was a professional man of affairs, but in a rather different sense. He was the sort of man who wears plum-coloured shirts and suède booties, teddy-bear coats and knitted ties. He had a strong, handsome face and small shapely hands which made promises as they moved on the table. He, too, I thought, was in his late forties. He had a deep, modulated caress of a voice.

"How do you do, Mr. Meredith."

At once, the hint of a fractionally more intimate relationship.

"How do you do."

There was a moment's pause.

"You've been with us four years now, Meredith?" asked Savile.

"A little less than that."

"And before that you were up at Oxford?"

"Yes."

"You took First Class Honours in Literæ Humaniores?"

"Yes."

"During the war you were with 136 Squadron in the Desert Campaign?"

"For about a year."

"Before you were taken prisoner you had spent some time with M.E.I.U.?"

"Yes."

"You know the Middle East well, therefore?"

"I hardly know it at all."

"Despite all your subsequent movements?"

"Yes."

"You have been back there?"

"Yes."

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"Why was that?"

"People often go back."

Tarnleigh nodded his sympathy. I remembered then that he, too, had had something to do with that area, but what I could not recall.

"Your knowledge of the languages, for example, is limited?"

"I can count up to ten."

"I see." Savile frowned into his papers. Then after a slight hesitation, "Meredith, I hope you won't mind my asking you this, but have you any strong political persuasions?"

"Yes."

"May I ask what they are?"

It was my turn to pause.

"They would be very complicated to explain, I'm afraid, sir."

Another pause.

"Meredith, I'm sorry if this sounds like a catechism. Do let me assure you, your own position is beyond any doubt. Your whole record has been exemplary. These questions are merely routine."

"I quite understand."

Another slight, and I felt, somewhat embarrassed pause.

Then I added:

"Perhaps it would help if I said that my ideas are unconnected with any political party. I find all party politics a trifle—unsophisticated."

Savile gave me his discreet smile.

"Thank you, Meredith."

He looked at his papers again. Then as if he had made up his mind:

"Meredith, these two gentlemen and I have the job of selecting a man to carry out a very delicate and indeed dangerous Intelligence job for us abroad. . . ."

He paused once more, glanced at his two colleagues, and took a sip of water from a tumbler in front of him. I had the impression that he was finding our conversation a difficult one.

"It won't have escaped your notice, Meredith," he went on, choosing his words carefully, "that there have been certain disappointments—no, worse than that—palpable shortcomings in the

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performance of some of the younger men appointed in the recent past. . . .”

But my mind was racing ahead of his words. So this was it. My integrity had found me out. They had cast their eyes around the office, and someone had said: “What about Meredith? Just the man—steady as a rock.” For I often gave the unperceptive this impression.

What did I feel at that moment? Fear, but the kind of crawling fear in the stomach that has its own strange paradoxical delight; doubt, pleasure, curiosity, and above all, this heady sensation of fear, the stimulant, which some men seek all their lives in dangerous places as others seek women, alcohol, or drugs.

“ . . . and that is why we have called you here.”

I am no hero. Yet I knew I had a certain quickness and foresight that had kept me alive in the past when braver men would have died, and I had done the jobs allotted to me. All men persist in the absurd persuasion that they themselves will miraculously stay alive, however many of their fellows are dying in doing precisely the same thing. Otherwise, how could they be urged into the firing-line at all? Therefore, hard on the immediate instinctive recoil from physical danger came the automatic compensation of exhilaration. I wanted to hear more.

I was convinced that they wanted me for the job. But Savile went on again in that deliberate, cultivated voice:

“Meredith, do you know a man called Several? Graham Several?”

“No,” I replied, “but I know a certain amount about him of course.”

I have noticed over and over again, living in London, how intertwined eight million separate lives may be. It is surely no coincidence. People move in certain groups, which cohere for social or economic or even cultural reasons, and if you ask a member of your circle if he knows X or Y either he will, or he will know someone who does, or he will have heard about them. For emanating from each group go numberless invisible strands, binding them to other groups, and if you yourself have no contact beyond a certain segment of the perimeter, your friends will. So I am convinced that all London is interlinked, and that if I set out to introduce myself

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to a dustman in Poplar I could find the necessary chain of contacts to do it. Several, however, was nowhere as remote as my Poplar dustman: he was much nearer to me than that.

He was—what shall I say he was? He was a young man; not a very young man—perhaps a year or two older than I was—thirty-one? His course and mine had run roughly parallel (though his with more eccentricity and much more brilliance) without ever crossing. I had first heard about him, grotesquely enough, somewhere in Israel, where his trick of drinking a pint of beer, while standing on his head, in six seconds had won him wide acclaim. In the air he was magnificent. His capacity for staying alive was phenomenal. He had once, they said, come in on an aircraft that was shot to pieces, bounced twice on the runway like a tennis ball, torn up the concrete for a quarter of a mile, and stepped out unhurt. He was often prominent in the yellowing, week-old papers which were flown to us from England. I read what I could about him; it was, after all, of local interest. I gathered that his father was an eminent archæologist, Sir Charles Several, and that they had lived in the Middle East for many years. In the odd way things happen during wars, we never met, though we must often have been close. His reputation swelled till it was almost a legend. But it was a newspaper legend, and after the war I heard little more of him. I knew, of course, the more unsavoury stories that never got into the papers. Back at University, I met one or two people who remembered him; he had been terribly wild. He once hit a man through a french window, I was told. I also met one or two dons who thought of him very highly indeed, which interested me. Then, in London, there were one or two other girls had spoken of him in those particular, who tones which women reserve only for libidinous men. That was the sum total of my knowledge about Graham Several. No, there was was one other thing. I knew that he was rich.

"Tell us what you know," said Tarnleigh, in his friendly voice.

I told them nearly everything.

"Yes," said Savile when I had finished. "But do you know anything of his present activities?"

"Nothing. But whatever they are I am sure he is miserable."

Lockhart leaned forward.

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"And why do you say that, Mr. Meredith?"

"Because he doesn't fit in any longer."

Tarnleigh nodded sympathetically. Now I come to think of it, he always nodded sympathetically.

"Perhaps I can enlighten you a little about his present activities?" said Savile.

"I should be interested."

But I did not altogether care for the trend of the conversation.

Savile consulted his notes again.

"He is a director of Amalgamated Engineering Investments Ltd. His maternal grandfather was chairman of the concern, and his mother, Lady Rosemary Several, now has the controlling interest. When he joined the board in 1946, the company were paying a dividend on their Ordinary Shares of five per cent. This year they paid twelve and a half per cent."

"Good," I said.

Savile looked up at me with, I thought, the hint of suspicion in his eyes.

"He is a man of pronounced financial acumen," said Tarnleigh.

"Or recklessness," I suggested.

"No," said Savile. "The last issue was heavily over-subscribed, and the last dividend was covered three and a half times. The company is now in a very sound position. I am sorry to detain you with a number of tedious and what may seem quite personal pieces of information."

"They are all straws in the wind," added Tarnleigh.

"Exactly," said Savile.

"A company must make profits," ventured Lockhart.

Savile gave his slow nod.

"Now, Meredith, will you glance at these?"

He slid across the desk a weighty bundle of documents, tied with a ribbon. I took it and undid the knot. It did not take me more than a few minutes to see that the writer was a professional in his field. Much of the material was too abstruse and technical for me to understand, but there was enough for me to form a professional judgment.

"This seems excellent work."

Savile smiled.

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"We thought so too. These are examples of Several's work which we were fortunate enough to be able to borrow quietly from a large business with which he has dealings."

Lockhart pushed up his spectacles and rubbed his eyes.

"I wonder if you begin to appreciate our dilemma, Meredith?" he asked.

Savile pulled the papers back and carefully tied the ribbon again.

"We have in Several a first-class man—a man of proved courage and ability, with an acute mind. He has certain linguistic and technical attainments which make him very nearly unique in his particular field. And yet," he went on slowly, "how do we know what is going on in Several's mind? How do we know whether he is—reliable?"

I must have looked puzzled, for Tarnleigh interjected:

"I think we should enlarge on this point, Minister." Then, with a pleasant smile in my direction, he continued, "You see, unreliability can take so many forms. Some of our disappointments have had their roots in deep political conviction, which we have not known about till too late. Others, incredibly enough, have come about through sheer avarice—the inability to resist money; and sometimes quite pathetically small sums of money. Others, again, through sheer frailty of the flesh, an inability to resist physical duress. We must be sure—absolutely sure—of Several's reliability on each and all of these criteria."

There was a long silence.

"What we need," said Savile, "is another opinion."

I felt disenchanted. I had every reason to know that security often entailed a number of dull routine jobs which could be performed seated safely in one's office. There had been a momentary promise about this interview. Now it was dispelled. But I was still a little puzzled.

"I should be glad to help," I said, "but I know no more than you have told me."

"But you could," Savile ventured in his gentle voice, "you could get to know a lot more."

In fact, my place in the jigsaw puzzle had come to me subconsciously some time ago, but it was only now that my logic had



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come to terms with my intuition. I was of the same age as Several, the same generation. I had had a similar background, a somewhat similar career, I moved in the same circles, indeed we had common friends—and therefore my motives would be beyond dispute. Besides, from their point of view I had the inestimable virtue of absolute, rock-solid, one hundred per cent reliability.

"Of course, if you'd rather not——?" suggested Tarnleigh tactfully.

I would have preferred not to do it. There was an element of distastefulness in the whole idea. But how could I refuse? I had come into the Office with my eyes wide open. I knew there might be unpleasant sides to it. Yet, by and large, I wanted the same things to happen in the world as Savile (but what did Savile really want, behind those sharp grey eyes, watching me now with the utmost care?). I was conscious of certain obligations I had to fulfil. And anyway, if I declined, would they not have to revise their estimates of my own reliability?

"I shall be glad to help," I said.

The tension relaxed.

"Good," said Savile. "Good. I knew we could rely on you" (thus confirming my fears about declining). "Now to details."

And we put our heads together for another twenty minutes.

When I walked back across the ornamental bridge, over the green lawn, the sun had gone behind a cloud, and the grass was dull. Shirley looked up as I came into the office.

"You were quite right," I told her. "They want me to be long-stop."

—But I found it impossible to concentrate on drafting my paragraphs, and soon after Shirley had gone home I locked the papers away and left the office at an unusually early hour. When I got back to my flat I poured myself a drink, turned on the wireless, and lay back in my chair. The evening sun streamed into the room, and I had the sudden presentiment that has come to me too often—that I should be elsewhere; that somewhere else my friends were all to be found, together; that we were just embarking on some evening pleasure, something unimportant and frivolous, something irresponsible. But it was the call of another decade, another century,

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and the friends had gone; the blazers and the dinner-jackets hung in wardrobes and smelt of moth-balls, and I was alone in my flat, with the sweet music seeping through the room and the sunlight slanting into my tired eyes like a torment.

The taxi turned into Milroy Square and drew up outside No. 17. It was a square, elegant, Georgian house, with a notice screwed to the wall which read "British Association of Contemporary Artists".

"The freehold of most of the houses in Milroy Square has belonged to my family for seventy-five years," Several explained. "I've let Number Seventeen to this bogus organisation and converted the top into a flat. Teddy Lorimer-Smith shares it with me." He opened the front door, and we went along a pastel-shaded wall, enlivened by contemporary lithographs, to the lift. "And not only do we live rent-free," he continued, pressing the button, "but we make a very reasonable annual profit on the transaction."

Inside his flat, a log fire hissed and spluttered. There was a divan, covered in creamy silk, a gramophone, and a grand piano. The standard lamps threw a warm, restrained glow over the furniture, and in a corner I saw a great stack of gleaming black records. On an oval table there were piles of books; on his desk by the window a mound of papers, some of them, I suspected, bills. On the walls were several paintings which I did not recognise, though the *genre* was familiar, but over the fireplace there was a drawing by a celebrated artist that I had much admired when it was first exhibited. There was only one photograph, of a woman aged about forty. The walls were lined with bookshelves. There were a number of bottles on a tray.

"What will you drink, Roger?" Several asked, throwing off his coat.

"Some beer please."

I was secretly pleased at the intimacy of my Christian name, used so quickly, yet with such complete naturalness.

"I have some beer, but I have also some rather special brandy that I think you'll like."

"Perhaps I'll change my mind then."

He poured me a generous measure and another for himself.

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We sipped the brandy in silence.

"I enjoyed F. P. Carroway," Several said at length.

My heart sank. Several had printed my essay on this obscure Victorian because he liked it, but, after all, I had written it only in order to meet Several. Once he was familiar with my name, I could have used any one of half a dozen friends to cement the matter by introducing us. But the initiative could not have come from me. Alison, whose father, James Christie, was head of my department, knew him quite well, and after I had mentioned the article casually one day, I knew she would say something about me next time she saw Several. She did; but not for five weeks, and I was consumed with impatience for the whole of that time. Yet my patience was rewarded, for when she mentioned my name at last to him, he said at once that he would be interested to meet me. And so the thought of F. P. Carroway, Victorian essayist of the third, or possibly fourth rank, over whose dim work I had toiled many dusty hours in the British Museum for this ulterior purpose alone, filled me with sudden misery.

"What a spectacular failure he was," I said.

"But how much nicer to be a spectacular failure than a dreary success," Several replied. "Only simple people succeed, and I'm bored by simplicity. Surely all one's best friends are failures?"

I considered this.

"I must say," I confessed at length, "that I have few friends I would call really successful."

"And do you like the ones that are?"

"No."

"There you are then."

He came across to refill my glass.

I noticed that his hands, though well kept and shapely, had a reddish tinge about them. It would be absurd to say his hand was not steady. It was; yet it trembled almost imperceptibly. I realised that this was always the case.

He was dressed that night in a well-cut grey suit; he wore a biscuit-coloured shirt with the collar cut quite sharply away, and a dark, plain crimson tie. His hair was fair, receding a little at the temple, and brushed back thickly. He was without doubt a very

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good-looking man, but many would have found him a trifle effeminate, though he was saved from effeminacy in a curious way, by the first red coloration of his cheek-bones; a subtle colour, not unlike the soft bloom of a ripe fruit. I realised with a sudden, comic clarity that this faint blush would one day be the rich purple of excess. It was the tell-tale system of minute veins, just below the pale skin, which was beginning to give away the truth. But his eyes were a clear, untroubled blue. He poured brandy into my glass with a quiet gravity.

"Tell me, do you know Alison well?" he enquired.

Did I know Alison well? What a question to answer! Perhaps; but perhaps I did not know her at all; perhaps that was the trouble. I could not recall the precise moment when she had burgeoned from a pink, gawky, long-legged schoolgirl into a tender, urgent, trusting, vulnerable woman; but it must have been a swift metamorphosis; I had been enmeshed before I had grasped what was happening. I cannot imagine what the point was as far as she was concerned. I sometimes think it was at first an elementary crush; that I had suddenly assumed heroic stature in her eyes, when they began to open in astonishment for the first time on the eccentric adult world. To be honest I had only once done anything on a heroic scale, though I confess I still remember the episode with smug self-satisfaction. The Christies used to give tennis parties in the big untidy garden of their Chelsea house, where they had built a quite reasonable hard court, and one day, just after the summer holidays had begun, so that Alison was there to watch, I had been detailed to play a singles match against Creasey. He was an immaculate man, well-oiled physically and mentally; he had won the Brackenbury at sixteen, a fact which no one held against him, but the trouble was that at thirty-six he had still not got over it. He was painstaking, efficient, and unbearable. He played a very fast game of tennis and was strongly fancied to win the Christie cuppers, as they were irreverently known in the Office.

I stood no chance against him, because I could not move about the court then as fast as I could once; but this very limitation had directed my energies into the development of a really vicious service. On this murmuring warm June afternoon he was leading me in the

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second set by five games to two, and it was match point. Angry and frustrated, I released a cannonading service which hit Creasey, without bouncing, in the solar plexus. With a ludicrous motion, agonised, dignified, and slow, he folded over, emitting a loud, whistling gasp. Mrs. Christie brought him a lime juice, and Christie fanned him with *The Times Literary Supplement*, which he had been surreptitiously reading in his deck-chair. Alison buried her face in her hands and shook silently. After that, I could do no wrong in her eyes. Of course there was more to it than that. I think I saw the same effortless goodness in her which I saw and loved in Christie; I think she saw in me, as Christie did, a certain waywardness. And of course, again, there was more to it than that. Trapped in the slough of sense, I had been careless of danger until Mrs. Christie's hot breath was, almost literally, at my shoulder.

It had been charming, none the less, and my only fear was that, in trying to evade her mother's grim purpose, I might give to Alison the impression of a callousness I by no means felt. I thought of her only with gratitude, solicitude, and relief that it was all over. We stood to each other in a relationship that nothing now could ever eradicate.

"Yes," I replied. "I suppose I do."

And then, to change the subject:

"I'm surprised that a magazine like *Literature* can survive these days," I said.

There was a hint of a question in my voice. He was perfectly frank in his reply.

"It can't really," he said, "it's subsidised. We sell eleven or twelve thousand copies a month. I squeeze a lot of advertising out of philistine capitalists. And we still lose a hundred and fifty on each issue."

He said it in a very matter-of-fact way. I had guessed that he lost money by running *Literature*, but I had not imagined it would be anything like as much.

"It seems a lot of money to lose—is it really worth it?"

"Why not? As a matter of fact it's rather a good wangle from the income-tax point of view. And one or two people who would otherwise starve make a living from it. Maurice for example."

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I had to think for a moment. Maurice de Barsac? Several was obviously on Christian-name terms with *recherché* literary circles.

"And Louis and Mark."

I worked out who Louis and Mark would be. It was not for some little time that I realised how Several called everyone by their Christian names, however illustrious, whether he had met them or not. It was a little affectation of his.

We talked about de Barsac. He was apparently an impossible man: conceited, sadistic, debauched, humourless, and more than a little cracked—yet deeply talented. Several reeled off the anecdotes about him; how he put Spanish Fly in his guests' cocktails, how he painted the finger-nails of the Madonna in his bedroom, how he was turned out of a public library because he smelt. I listened with horror and fascination.

Several was a brilliant raconteur. He had an excellent ear; he could conjure up a dozen English dialects and a score of foreign accents; and he could mimic every one of his friends with a cruel perfection.

Our drinking was not outrageous, but it was steady, and I found myself laughing louder and louder at each vignette, while he watched me with his smiling eyes. Then he said sharply:

"Listen, who's this?"

He began to speak, and the laughter died from my lips. It was a voice I had not heard for fifteen years—my father's. Or almost—a rather younger, slightly more pedantic version of his familiar accents.

"But who's that?" I asked in astonishment.

"You," he said.

I thought I had heard my own voice for the first time.

This finely attuned ear of his was important, because it had enabled him to secure a ready grasp, not only of foreign accents, but of foreign languages. Even this qualification alone made him almost unique. I had another proof of this strange gift of his, however, before I went home that night. Drowsy and mellow with brandy, we had finally fallen into a pleasurable silence, holding our glasses in our hands and watching the flames crackle and roar in

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the chimney. Then Several got up and put on the Brahms clarinet quintet. When it was over he asked me what I thought of it.

"A beautiful recording."

"Yes. But there is a fault in it."

"Impossible."

"Listen again."

He began to play it again, his hand poised over the gramophone. Suddenly he lifted the arm from the record.

"There—did you hear?"

"No."

He played the snatch of music again, while I accentuated every nerve on the sound. Suddenly I heard the veriest splinter of silence in the flow of music, and at once Several whipped up the arm again, looking at me enquiringly.

"Yes—I heard it that time."

Several shook his head.

"A great pity. Otherwise it is a perfect recording."

I felt obtuse at that moment, yet on reflection, I doubt if one in a thousand would have detected that flaw. Yet Several noticed. He seemed indolent in every movement, careless and unaware. It was a façade. In fact, he was diabolically acute. I wriggled uneasily in my chair. Could he possess equal powers of intuition; could he, for example, read the guilt in my mind?

The doubt left me as we continued to talk. It would be impossible for him to know what I was not even thinking, and our conversation, rambling and exhilarating, drove all thought of my eventual purpose away. And so the hours raced by unnoticed.

When I looked at my watch it was three in the morning. I jumped up, apologising.

"But it's not at all late," he protested, "and I'm not tired, I assure you."

It was true. As the night wore on he had grown gayer and, if possible, younger. He was slowly waking up. He told me that he seldom went to bed before three or four in the morning. But it was not, I afterwards realised, that he could do with little sleep. On the contrary, he often slept till noon. It was a privilege I could not share; I had to leave my flat at nine-fifteen in the morning. We bade

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each other a cordial good night. As I leaned over to pick up my coat, I could not help noticing a long foolscap list, closely typed, of shares, with their present prices—I can recall the names of some even now. He helped me, with that affectionate courtesy of his, into my coat. There was an open book on his bedside table. It was “**Enemies of Promise**”.

It was during the next week that I decided, finally, what I was going to say about Several. I spent most of the week preparing and destroying draft after draft, until I had reduced my conclusions to four sides of quarto paper. I argued the thing out as ruthlessly as I could, exploring every twist and turn of his complex personality. But there still remained the final paragraph, in which I had to give a simple answer to the question I had been posed. Was it to be yes or no? I admitted, with a sense of shame, that on the cold evidence there was only one answer I could give. It would be criminal to suggest that they turned elsewhere when a man of Several's ability was available. No, I hesitated for a different reason, a reason which, though human enough, and no doubt understandable, would be, from the viewpoint of the Office, unworthy and culpable. I was concerned about the answer which reason dictated I should offer; I was desperately worried that I was consigning him to some fate of which I could have no clear conception; and I could not easily send anyone, let alone Several, even to the possibility of horror and death.

And so I wrestled with myself throughout that gentle, tremulous week, striving to defeat my remorseless conclusion with the consideration (a true one) that even when the balance sheet had been drawn, and all the arguments for and against had been reasoned out, it was still something deeper than reason that told me Several would do. It was an ironic point to reach after so long; but it did not alter the fact, that, working to the limits of my ability, I had tried Several and found he fulfilled the single, lonely criterion which was demanded. I knew this, but I did not wish to confess it. And at this juncture, as I saw with all too painful clarity, the claims of simple human friendship had diverged from the obligations imposed on me by the Office. Nevertheless, in the end I could not escape the



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blunt fact that I had undertaken the task with my eyes wide open; I had known what it might entail, and I could not go back now. Finally, I took up my pen and wrote in a last paragraph:

It is agreed, therefore, that on all the accepted criteria, Several is the best choice we could make. You have asked me, however, in view of our recent disappointments, to explore the marginal world of personal relationships into which our official curiosity has never before intruded, but which we now know in retrospect may assume an overwhelming significance. I think I can say that, on this plane, Several is no more or less than his age and generation have made him. His talent is only a caricature of theirs, his quietism of theirs. And this curious tranquillity is not disillusion, which was the lot of a previous generation; nor is it an obtuse optimism. Having no dreams, they will not be disenchanted; having no worse to face than what they already know, they need not despair. You cannot expect from Several, therefore, any fierce, irrational allegiances; he cannot maintain the posture of a blind loyalty he does not really feel. Nevertheless, in the cold light of reason, he thinks, as I do, that our modest way, for all its exasperating inadequacies, is the most sane and the most just, and offers us the best chance of survival. In these circumstances I am sure you can rely on Several, perhaps long after the boundaries of all reasonable human demands have been passed.

I signed my name, blotted the page, read the whole thing through once more, folded it, and slid it into an envelope. It was a drab little conclusion to reach, after so much heartache, a few lines on a piece of Office paper; who knew what those few words of mine might one day entail? But I was romancing (or so I assured myself)—there was always an excellent chance that those four clipped sheets would moulder quietly in some office file till we were dead, or past caring. You never knew with the Office. Still, I wished I could have been sure, one way or the other.

My previous experience had been that Savile called his Committee together to discuss my reports at once; but though this last memo was in his hands on Thursday evening, I heard nothing on Friday. I spent the week-end quietly at my grandparents' house. I

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am afraid they must have concluded that I was sickening for something or in love, for I was not very communicative. It was the following week, however, that was most trying. There was still no word from Savile, and I found it impossible to concentrate on my work. But on Monday of the next week, quite early in the day, Savile's secretary telephoned:

"Mr. Meredith?"

"Speaking."

"This is the Minister's Office. Could you come across at once please?"

"Certainly."

Shirley had become used to these little pilgrimages, and hardly raised an eyebrow when I told her where I was going. It was a pleasant Spring morning; the sullen rains had done their work; the borders sang with colour, and the grass was fresh and green under my feet. It was one of those journeys where each step is printed on the memory. I entered Savile's room, and saw at once that there had been a small change. Savile still sat in his swivel chair, well groomed and imperturbable as always; on his right sat Lockhart as before, untidy and friendly, but Nigel Tarnleigh's place on Savile's left was now occupied by Christie. There was no one else in the room. I felt a spring of happiness at this; perhaps it had been decided, not before it was time, that Tarnleigh was not ideally suited to a parley of this nature. Savile was charming as always:

"Ah, Meredith, I'm afraid we've been a little longer than usual digesting your last document—please forgive us. I do want to say, before we go any farther, how very pleased we all are"—he glanced round at Christie, who nodded slightly—"at the able fashion in which you have undertaken this assignment. Most commendable. You have confirmed our faith in you in a most exemplary way. As a result of your work in this field, I think we shall be entrusting you with other duties in the same field in the future."

He glanced enquiringly at Christie, who made the same solemn little inclination of his head, his hands clenched in front of him, elbows resting on the table.

I muttered something. Savile beamed, then cleared his throat and addressed himself to his papers.

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"Now, Meredith, I have told you how valuable your work has been. However, I am sure you will be the first to appreciate that we have had to draw our information from many other sources before coming to our final decision. It has not been easy."

"I can understand that."

"Yes, of course. Well, now, without more ado we want you to know that Mr. Nigel Tarnleigh has been entrusted with the duty we had in mind for Several, and in fact left the country, charged with this responsibility, some two weeks ago."

When he had said this there was a long silence. As the room came back into focus, I saw that Lockhart was staring at the ceiling, his hands clasped behind his head, his chair tilted back. He looked bored. Christie was still frowning at his knuckles. Only Savile was looking at me, with that friendly, and as I now considered, faintly inane smile of his. I did not think that Tarnleigh would voluntarily betray his country, but I knew too that he would never survive physical duress. It was clear to me that either they were mad or I was. In either event there was only one possible comment.

"In that case, sir, I resign."

"Oh, now really, Meredith, I know it's been a strain, but there's no need——"

But I was already at the door. As I opened it, I heard another voice, Christie's, high and strident:

*"Roger!"*

It was like a father's voice, summoning a naughty child from some wickedness in the garden. Christie had often been like a father to me. I slammed the door so hard that the staid walls of Lacrymer House seemed to quiver. I said that I could remember each individual step as I walked across the lawn that morning. So I could; yet oddly enough, I cannot remember recrossing it at all. But I must have done, for I certainly went back into my own office, pulled open a drawer, put one or two things in my pocket, thrust on my hat, picked up my umbrella, and went out again. Shirley watched me with stupefaction. I am sure she had been convinced for some time, so eccentric had my behaviour become, that I was heading for a nervous breakdown or worse. I paused in the doorway, trying to think of something to say. But good-bye sounded absurdly

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melodramatic, and nothing else seemed appropriate, so after this moment's pause I closed the door quite gently and was gone.

Out in the busy street I was temporarily confused by the scurrying humdrum world that flowed carelessly by me. Then I hailed a taxi.

"Seventeen Milroy Square," I told the driver.

He swung his little flag down with a sharp clang, and we purred away. I lay back against the leather upholstery and closed my eyes. I believe psychologists claim that it is impossible to think of nothing, to let the mind drain of all encumbrances and become void; but I had a good shot at it as we swayed across London that Spring morning. He put me down outside the house, and I went up in the lift. Several was not in, but his latch was up, and I looked inside. The room was untidy, and he seemed to have gone out in a hurry. Books and papers lay everywhere in thick confusion. I crossed to his desk, and something made me pick up a fat black book which lay there. It was filled with pages of Greek, written in Several's neat, square hand. It had never occurred to me, when I had toiled long hours over those ancient languages, that they would ever be of the slightest use to me in the hard world outside. Yet now I was glad I had acquired this impractical and outmoded talent. I could read what Several had written quite easily. It was a kind of diary, full of random impressions and jottings, not continuous, but written in fits and starts. Sometimes there were gaps of several weeks; sometimes a day was dismissed in three lines; sometimes he filled several pages with the description of one small incident. Several's Greek was mellifluous and ingenious; I could not help smiling, even then, with pleasure, as I saw his renderings of words like "night club" or "motor racing". But he had not bothered to turn people's names into their Greek equivalents, and, with a start, I saw, under an entry dated some time the previous September, the disguised familiarity: *ρoveq* What had he to say about Roger? I soon saw, with a twinge of disappointment, that the diary gave away little more than its owner. It was nearly always quite factual and non-committal, a plain record of our meetings and excursions together. Once or twice he commented briefly, for example: "Roger seemed worried today" or "Roger looked tired this evening". And then, in

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February I saw another name, and as I saw it, I caught my breath. It stood there, innocent and elegant in its Greek form: *σaviλe* But how did Savile's name occur in Several's diary? "I had a long and interesting talk with Savile today" the entry said. Of course, it could be someone else with the same name. But I did not think so for a moment. What had Savile said to me that day? He wished he could have the privilege of knowing Several? Again I felt an overwhelming sense of helplessness, of being shut out, like a child, from some enormously important and frightening secret. Then I heard footsteps on the stairs. I dropped the book in a hurry and went to the window. A few moments later, Several came in, humming cheerfully.

"Oh, hello, Roger! This is a nice surprise. I don't blame you for chucking the Office on a morning like this. I've deserted mine, I don't mind admitting."

His mild eyes strayed innocently to the black book on his desk, then back to me. He seemed unconcerned.

"It's a confounded nuisance," he went on, "I have to make another short trip to the States. I must be there to start work on Friday, but I believe there's a good Dutch plane I can pick up at Heath Row. Incidentally, are you feeling quite well, Roger? You look like a piece of marble."

"I'm sorry to look so gloomy on such a perfect morning. As a matter of fact I had rather a heavy night."

"At your grandparents'? Are they leading you astray in their old age? Wait a minute, I'll fix you something which I find very cheering on these occasions."

He disappeared into the kitchen, still humming happily, and came back carrying a tumbler which foamed in a refreshing way. I drank it down.

"Thank you. That feels much better."

"Good. Well, now, where can we find a good spot for a pastoral, summery lunch? I feel like eating on a terrace in my shirt-sleeves, but I suppose eyebrows would be raised."

In fact, we ate very pleasantly, though not in the open air, and Several excused himself soon afterwards because of a business appointment. My flat received me coldly, resenting my intrusion

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during its hours of accustomed solitude. I sat down and tried to read, but I found myself shivering violently. I tried to ignore it, but when my teeth began to chatter, I thought better of it, and phoned Richard Nugent, an old school-friend and also my doctor. I described my symptom.

"Go to bed and keep warm," he told me. "I'll be round as soon as possible."

When he arrived he frowned at me anxiously.

"Good heavens," he said, "you do look rather seedy. Let's have a look at your temperature."

He made a characteristically thorough investigation, then shook his head.

"Well, I can't see that there's anything organically wrong with you. Have you had any violent physical shock lately?"

I shook my head. Nugent looked puzzled.

"Well, I'll give you something to take, and I strongly recommend you to stay in bed until you hear differently from me."

He gave me something which put me to sleep almost at once. I slept right through till the next morning, when he came to see me again. He gave me some more tablets, and I was glad to plunge into a dreamless oblivion again. On Wednesday morning I felt fresh and well again. Nugent allowed me to get up, but advised me to take things easily.

I had promised to take Several to the airport that evening, and I called for him at about eight.

When we reached the airport we quickly completed the formalities, and Several's luggage was stowed on board. We walked up and down on the tarmac, under the arc-lamps, passing to and fro beneath the silver fins of the monster that would soon take him from me, without speaking. At last Several said: "I may be away longer than I thought—perhaps even till September."

We strolled on in silence, turned and walked back again. The tannoy blared, telling the passengers to go aboard.

"Tell me, Graham," I said, in sudden desperation, "how much did you know?"

He stopped and turned towards me. The old mischief smiled in his face. He held out his hand to say good-bye.

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"How much do we ever know, Roger?"

And then he was gone.

I watched his plane lumber across to the runway, turn, and gather its might angrily for its great leap into the sky. Then with a mad thunder, it had rolled by me, skimmed the ground, climbed, hovered, climbed again, till the black silhouette was lost and only its winking navigation lights could be seen. Then, at last, they, too, vanished in a cloud of stars.

People try to escape in different ways: I had much to forget, and I chose a somewhat unorthodox device. I went into the country with all the maps and reference books I could lay hands on, and traced out the ancient Icknield Way along lanes, over rivers, through woods, across arterial roads; and in this curious pursuit I found satisfaction and rest. I also went to a point-to-point and lost a pound on a horse called Harry Boy, which dropped dead on the second time round. It was an unusual thing to happen, and only struck me as an unfavourable omen. I returned to London in May with no clear intuition of what I should do.

I had enough money to last me about a year—two, if I was more careful than usual. I had no doubt that I could get a job in business. However, I decided to spend two weeks on a manuscript I was trying to finish. It would earn me, when published, I calculated, about enough to keep myself for two weeks, and I therefore decided that it should have two weeks of my undivided attention.

And on one bright Sunday morning, when May was nearly out, I opened the paper and saw Nigel Tarnleigh's handsome, discontented face, huge and grotesque on the front page. The headline said:

### MISSING PLAYBOY MYSTERY

and underneath in smaller print:

### DID TARNLEIGH KNOW STATE SECRETS?

I read what purported to be an exclusive account of his disappearance. The fact that he had acted in an advisory capacity to the Office had leaked out. There was a truculent, bullying leading article calling for stern punitive measures inside the Office. On an

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inside page there was a stark, full-length photograph of Savile, the background cut away, striding out over the newsprint, brief-case in hand, looking a little surprised, as well he might, at all the fuss. A heavy black caption underneath read:

### THIS MAN MUST GO

I bought all the other Sunday papers. Each carried the exclusive story of Tarnleigh's disappearance. His past life had been ransacked in a most painstaking and thorough way for significant anecdotes. In one paper there was a large artist's impression of Tarnleigh's face, composed from the available photographs, with little arrows indicating "Weak mouth" or "Intellectual forehead" (two certain pointers to treason). I laid the papers out fanwise before me on the floor. Tarnleigh's face beamed up at me from all directions. What was it Tarnleigh had wanted? Success? And now he had it, in a paradoxical way, fame and publicity beyond his wildest dreams. Only he was not here to enjoy it. I leaned back in the arm-chair and closed my eyes. Something was still wrong. I had known the Office too long and too intimately to think them guilty of such bungling idiocy. Tarnleigh's disappearance had been publicised a little too lavishly, too spontaneously, almost as if— Then I began to laugh. I laughed for quite a long time, loudly, but I derived little pleasure from my laughter. The newspapers that Sunday morning had suddenly thrown me half a dozen missing pieces as if to say: here, put these in your puzzle. I do not know how long I sat there, but I was eventually awoken from my reverie by the violent ringing of my front-door bell. I was a little apprehensive in case the Press had decided to explore even my tenuous association with Nigel Tarnleigh. When I opened the door, however, I found no one more alarming than Christie standing there. He was dressed in a sports jacket and corduroy trousers, and looked as if he had been employing himself in the garden. I did not quite know what to make of his expression.

"Have you seen the papers?" he asked without ceremony.

"Yes. Please come in."

"No—could you come with me. I must have a talk to you. I have a taxi waiting."



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For one comical moment I imagined the possibility of two grim men with overcoats, hard bulges in the pockets, sitting back patiently waiting in a powerful black limousine. Then I looked at Christie again, and smiled. The idea was absurd.

"All right," I said.

"Good man," said Christie.

The taxi, innocent of other occupants, grim or otherwise, carried us away, and I soon saw from our progress that we were heading for the Office. Christie leaned back, saying nothing. But I thought he was doing plenty of thinking.

We went into the silent, gloomy hall, past a surprised commissioner, who saluted smartly, and walked along the corridors to Christie's office, our feet ringing with unnatural loudness round the deserted walls. Christie pushed open the door, and I felt a sensation of familiarity at the renewed spectacle of its unchanged shabbiness. Christie sat down in his chair, and I sat opposite him.

"I think," said Christie, "there are one or two things I ought to explain."

"Go ahead."

Christie considered.

"When we told you, almost exactly a year ago, that we needed a man to do a difficult and dangerous job for us, we were speaking the exact truth; except for one small particular."

"Which was?"

"The tense. We had needed one."

Christie smiled.

"All those long months before you first saw us, Roger, we had been occupied with this problem. So had Several. I suppose it will not come as any surprise to you now to learn that Several had been one of our most trusted and able men ever since the end of the war?"

"No."

"No, I thought not. Several, as you quickly discovered, Roger, is not merely good in this field. His qualifications make him irreplaceable. That's why we've kept him in this country. It didn't matter. You know as well as I do that nowadays this kind of work is done by slide rules, deduction, interpolation. Several did nearly all his most brilliant work here in London, sitting in an office, working

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from a mound of papers, filling in the gaps from his own calculations, sometimes just with a flash of his extraordinary intuition. But there was one gap we just couldn't close, and it was vital that we did. Oh, we tried everything. Several worked on it for months, night and day. But it was no good. There was one obstinate piece of brute information we just hadn't got. Finally, Several came to me and said:

"Look here, this interpolation has carried us much farther than we had any right to expect, but we're never going to break the whole thing down unless someone undertakes a little excursion on behalf of the Firm and fills in the missing pieces. You know there's only one person who can do that. For God's sake pull all the strings you can and let me go."

"Well, I wasn't keen, as you can imagine, nor was Savile, and nor was anyone else. But Several had logic on his side. He knew the whole problem backwards. And he had the youth, the courage, the technical equipment, the linguistic qualifications—and something more. Call it flair if you like. He was clearly the only one who could go. We worked out the plan in meticulous detail. We checked it and double-checked it. We had alternatives if anything went wrong, and alternatives to the alternatives. I have never seen such a finely meshed piece of planning. And it worked. About eighteen months ago, Several left this country. A lot of people in high places here had their fingers tightly crossed for him, I don't mind telling you. If he hadn't come back, it would have been a disaster. But he came back—and he brought back what we wanted."

"Splendid," I said, "but in that case——"

"There were two aspects to our problem. One was to get what we wanted, the other to ensure that it was not missed. We were quite happy about the first aim, but Several was not quite so happy about the second. Now, as you will no doubt remember, during the last war, the art of double bluff was carried to a fantastic pitch of refinement. The stage was reached when a genuine blunder of the first magnitude could deliver vital information into the enemy's hand, but would nevertheless be ignored in case it was some elaborate trap. This has meant that our artifice has had to move into an incredible plane of complexity. If we wanted them to think that we

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still desperately wanted to know, it was no use dropping some note conveniently into their hands. We had to be really worried, and really scared. We had to present them with a picture of meticulous planning at the highest level over a long period."

"I see. And then the whole story had to be carried as faithfully as possible to the right quarter."

"Exactly. But we had grown bored with documents washed up in bottles, and so had the other side. Such devices were *vieux jeux*. No, today intelligence is a cerebrotonic activity, where each side knows the names of the other's players, almost like an international chess match. Don't worry, they know Several all right. And indeed, my dear Roger, they undoubtedly know all about you too."

"Through Tarnleigh?"

Christie smiled.

"Poor Tarnleigh. He wanted so much to be a success. Yes—he has told them everything they want to know; in full, without reservations. Everything we want them to know."

"But there were some highly confidential documents——"

Christie waved a hand carelessly in the air, and laughed.

"My dear Roger, you don't think we *really* circulated all those documents to Tarnleigh do you? He knew only enough to make his story authentic, and the conferences you attended were designed simply to lead him up the garden path. Of course you saw his signature on vital documents: I filled it in with my left hand. No, he has taken a wonderful set of facts with him; beautifully and hopelessly mendacious, as he is himself. It was all so simple. The only question was how long Tarnleigh would last without being caught. In fact, it was a month and two days."

I had a very unpleasant suspicion.

"I suppose you didn't by chance—arrange for Tarnleigh to be caught?"

Christie looked serious.

"Oh, no. In any case it wasn't necessary. Tarnleigh genuinely believed he was at last doing something great and unselfish, but of course his inadequacy gave him away before he had a chance. When we were sure he had been picked up, laden with his false papers and deliciously bogus information, we organised the publicity."

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"And what about Geoffrey Lockhart?"

Christie grinned.

"Oh, don't worry about him. He has various other irons in the fire on our behalf. I thought he played up very well, didn't you?"

"But, what happened before Tarnleigh agreed to talk?"

Christie looked slightly uncomfortable. Then he laughed.

"You know Tarnleigh. He'd talk before anyone touched him. But why worry about Tarnleigh? He'd already done enough to earn himself a long spell inside. It was his fortune that we found a more useful way for him to end his career."

"So this will fulfil your second aim—to ensure that nothing is even missed?"

Christie shrugged.

"For a year or two. Then we'll have to think of something else. No doubt they will eventually grow tired of waiting for Several, just as no doubt Tarnleigh would have done if he'd remained free."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Tarnleigh was under the impression, you see, that he was clearing the ground for Several, that he was an advance party. He was told that Several would contact him at a certain well-known café within a matter of weeks, with money and all the hundred and one other little odds and ends you need for a job of this sort. It was to have been"—and Christie beamed at his blasphemous jest—"a sort of second coming. But I'm afraid, like the Evangelists, it has been a long wait for poor old Tarnleigh. No, we've won valuable ground, perhaps another year or two of breathing space. Then we'll have to think of something else."

He came over and put his hand on my back.

"This job is never finished, you know, Roger. And this incident has done you a lot of good. Savile decided that it would be excellent training for you, and would enable Several to keep a close eye on your progress. I need hardly say his reports have been highly favourable."

"I'm thrilled to hear it."

"Roger, I'd like you to come—just once more—to Lacrymer House."

"If you say so."

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Once more I trod silently over that smooth turf. I noticed that a tennis court had now been erected on it, and two young men I knew faintly were preparing to play on it. They waved cheerily at me. Inside Lacrymer House it was cool and still. The lift was not working, and we walked up the stairs. Christie led me past Savile's door and stopped at the one next to it. He turned and smiled at me. Then he opened it.

Inside was a small office, indistinguishable from many another in the building. There were telephones, filing cabinets, books and papers and—a slide rule.

"This is Several's room," Christie said. He took me to the window. "You see," he said, "it has quite a pleasant view."

I looked out over the lawn and the gardens, over the white ornamental bridge, over the bobbing heads of the two young men now engaged in a furious rally on the tennis court. I looked along the sombre windows of the Office, until my gaze halted at one window which I knew well. Inside I could see a bare polished desk, and across on the other side of the room, a smaller desk with Shirley's typewriter on it.

"That desk is still there, waiting for you, any time you like," Christie said quietly. "We can never be sure whether Several's life is not in danger; and we should like you to stay as close to him as you can. We can't afford to lose him. Why don't you think about it?"

I looked at Christie, and read the anxiety in his eyes. I realised that he wanted me back to fulfil, not only the Office's needs, but also his own. He wanted me to justify with my presence everything they had done.

"Several is in America discussing all these things with his opposite numbers over there," he went on. "I know he wants you to work with him when he comes back. Won't you think it over?"

I stared out of the window again, listened absently to the plonk of the tennis ball on the court beneath. But I was seeing Tarnleigh's manly, handsome face, the playboy's hands which twisted nervously under the table, while he waited at a café in a hostile city for someone who would never come.

## GODFREY SMITH

"No," I said, "I shan't even think it over."

Christie looked puzzled, as if there was something he could not understand. I went to the door, opened it, then turned back.

"Good-bye, sir," I said.

"Good-bye, Roger."

I walked out into the quiet Sunday street, and strolled across the park. It was a crisp, perfect day in early summer, and the earth was heavy with life. The leaves were green on the nodding branches as I paced idly beneath them. In September they would begin to fall, laying down their thick ochre carpets, while the boughs stood bare like stencils against the pale autumnal sun.

## AMBROSE BIERCE

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### *Parker Adderson, Philosopher*

"Prisoner, what is your name?"

"As I am to lose it at daylight tomorrow morning, it is hardly worth concealing. Parker Adderson."

"Your rank?"

"A somewhat humble one; commissioned officers are too precious to be risked in the perilous business of a spy. I am a sergeant."

"Of what regiment?"

"You must excuse me; if I answered that it might, for anything I know, give you an idea of whose forces are in your front. Such knowledge as that is what I came into your lines to obtain, not to impart."

"You are not without wit."

"If you will have the patience to wait, you will find me dull enough tomorrow."

"How do you know that you are to die tomorrow morning?"

"Among spies captured by night that is the custom. It is one of the nice observances of the profession."

The general so far laid aside the dignity appropriate to a Confederate officer of high rank and wide renown as to smile. But no one in his power and out of his favour would have drawn any happy augury from that outward and visible sign of approval. It was neither genial nor infectious; it did not communicate itself to the other persons exposed to it—the caught spy who had provoked it and the armed guard who had brought him into the tent and now stood a little apart, watching his prisoner in the yellow candle-light. It was no part of that warrior's duty to smile; he had been detailed for another purpose. The conversation was resumed; it was, in fact, a trial for a capital offence.

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"You admit, then, that you are a spy—that you came into my camp disguised as you are, in the uniform of a Confederate soldier, to obtain information secretly regarding the numbers and disposition of my troops?"

"Regarding, particularly, their numbers. Their disposition I already knew. It is morose."

The general brightened again; the guard, with a severer sense of his responsibility, accentuated the austerity of his expression and stood a trifle more erect than before. Twirling his grey slouch hat round and round upon his forefinger, the spy took a leisurely survey of his surroundings. They were simple enough. The tent was a common "wall tent", about eight feet by ten in dimensions, lighted by a single tallow-candle stuck into the haft of a bayonet, which was itself stuck into a pine-table, at which the general sat, now busily writing and apparently forgetful of his unwilling guest. An old rag-carpet covered the earthen floor; an'older hair-trunk, a second chair, and a roll of blankets were about all else that the tent contained; in General Clavering's command, Confederate simplicity and penury of "pomp and circumstance" had attained their highest development. On a large nail driven into the tent-pole at the entrance was suspended a sword-belt supporting a long sabre, a pistol in its holster, and, absurdly enough, a bowie knife. Of that most unmilitary weapon it was the general's habit to explain that it was a cherished souvenir of the peaceful days when he was a civilian.

It was a stormy night. The rain cascaded upon the canvas in torrents, with the dull, drum-like sound familiar to dwellers in tents. As the whooping blasts charged upon it the frail structure shook and swayed and strained at its confining stakes and ropes.

The general finished writing, folded the half sheet of paper, and spoke to the soldier guarding Adderson: "Here, Tassman, take that to the adjutant-general; then return."

"And the prisoner, general?" said the soldier, saluting, with an inquiring glance in the direction of that unfortunate.

"Do as I said," replied the officer, curtly.

The soldier took the note and ducked himself out of the tent. General Clavering turned his handsome, clean cut face toward the



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Federal spy, looked him in the eyes, not unkindly, and said: "It is a bad night, my man."

"For me, yes."

"Do you guess what I have written?"

"Something worth reading, I dare say. And—perhaps it is my vanity—I venture to suppose that I am mentioned in it."

"Yes; it is a memorandum for an order to be read to the troops at *reveille* concerning your execution. Also some notes for the guidance of the provost-marshal in arranging the details of that event."

"I hope, general, the spectacle will be intelligently arranged, for I shall attend it myself."

"Have you any arrangements of your own that you wish to make? Do you wish to see a chaplain, for example?"

"I could hardly secure a longer rest for myself by depriving him of some of his."

"Good God, man! do you mean to go to your death with nothing but jokes upon your lips? Do you not know that this is a serious matter?"

"How can I know that? I have never been dead in all my life. I have heard that death is a serious matter, but never from any of those who have experienced it."

The general was silent for a moment; the man interested, perhaps amused, him—a type not previously encountered.

"Death," he said, "is at least a loss—a loss of such happiness as we have, and of opportunities for more."

"A loss of which we will never be conscious can be borne with composure and therefore expected without apprehension. You must have observed, general, that of all the dead men with whom it is your soldierly pleasure to strew your path, none show signs of regret."

"If the being dead is not a regrettable condition, yet the becoming so—the act of dying—appears to be distinctly disagreeable in one who has not lost the power to feel."

"Pain is disagreeable, no doubt. I never suffer it without more or less discomfort. But he who lives longest is most exposed to it. What you call dying is simply the last pain—there is really no such thing as dying. Suppose, for illustration, that I attempt to escape. You

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lift the revolver that you are courteously concealing in your lap, and——”

The general blushed like a girl, then laughed softly, disclosing his brilliant teeth, made a slight inclination of his handsome head, and said nothing. The spy continued: “You fire, and I have in my stomach what I did not swallow. I fall, but am not dead. After a half hour of agony I *am* dead. But at any given instant of that half hour I was either alive or dead. There is no transition period.

“When I am hanged tomorrow morning it will be quite the same; while conscious I shall be living; when dead, unconscious. Nature appears to have ordered the matter quite in my interest—the way that I should have ordered it myself. It is so simple,” he added with a smile, “that it seems hardly worth while to be hanged at all.”

At the finish of his remarks there was a long silence. The general sat impassive, looking into the Khan's face, but apparently not attentive to what had been said. It was as if his eyes had mounted guard over the prisoner, while his mind concerned itself with other matters. Presently he drew a long, deep breath, shuddered, as one awakened from a dreadful dream, and exclaimed almost inaudibly: “Death is horrible!”—this man of death.

“It was horrible to our savage ancestors,” said the spy, gravely, “because they had not enough intelligence to dissociate the idea of consciousness from the idea of the physical forms in which it is manifested—as an even lower order of intelligence, that of the monkey, for example, may be unable to imagine a house without inhabitants, and seeing a ruined hut fancies a suffering occupant. To us it is horrible because we have inherited the tendency to think it so, accounting for the notion by wild and fanciful theories of another world—as names of places give rise to legends explaining them, and reasonless conduct to philosophies in justification. You can hang me, general, but there your power of evil ends; you cannot condemn me to heaven.”

The general appeared not to have heard; the spy's talk had merely turned his thoughts into an unfamiliar channel, but there they pursued their will independently to conclusions of their own. The storm had ceased, and something of the solemn spirit of the

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night had imparted itself to his reflections, giving them the sombre tinge of a supernatural dread. Perhaps there was an element of prescience in it. "I should not like to die," he said, "—not tonight."

He was interrupted—if, indeed, he had intended to speak further—by the entrance of an officer of his staff, Captain Hasterlick, the provost-marshal. This recalled him to himself; the absent look passed away from his face.

"Captain," he said, acknowledging the officer's salute, "this man is a Yankee spy captured inside our lines with incriminating papers on him. He has confessed. How is the weather?"

"The storm is over, sir, and the moon shining."

"Good; take a file of men, conduct him at once to the parade-ground, and shoot him."

A sharp cry broke from the spy's lips. He threw himself forward, thrust out his neck, expanded his eyes, clenched his hands.

"Good God!" he cried hoarsely, almost inarticulately; "you do not mean that! You forget—I am not to die until morning."

"I have said nothing of morning," replied the general, coldly; "that was an assumption of your own. You die now."

"But, general, I beg—I implore you to remember; I am to hang! It will take some time to erect the gallows—two hours—an hour. Spies are hanged; I have rights under military law. For Heaven's sake, general, consider how short——"

"Captain, observe my directions."

The officer drew his sword, and, fixing his eyes upon the prisoner, pointed silently to the opening of the tent. The prisoner, deathly pale, hesitated; the officer grasped him by the collar and pushed him gently forward. As he approached the tent-pole the frantic man sprang to it, and, with cat-like agility, seized the handle of the bowie knife, plucked the weapon from the scabbard, and, thrusting the captain aside, leaped upon the general with the fury of a madman, hurling him to the ground and falling headlong upon him as he lay. The table was overturned, the candle extinguished, and they fought blindly in the darkness. The provost-marshal sprang to the assistance of his superior officer, and was himself prostrated upon the struggling forms. Curses and inarticulate cries of rage and pain came from the welter of limbs and bodies; the tent came down upon them, and

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beneath its hampering and enveloping folds the struggle went on. Private Tassman, returning from his errand and dimly conjecturing the situation, threw down his rifle, and, laying hold of the flouncing canvas at random, vainly tried to drag it off the men under it; and the sentinel who paced up and down in front, not daring to leave his beat though the skies should fall, discharged his piece. The report alarmed the camp; drums beat the long roll and bugles sounded the assembly, bringing swarms of half-clad men into the moonlight, dressing as they ran, and falling into line at the sharp commands of their officers. This was well; being in line the men were under control; they stood at arms while the general's staff and the men of his escort brought order out of confusion by lifting off the fallen tent and pulling apart the breathless and bleeding actors in that strange contention.

Breathless, indeed, was one; the captain was dead, the handle of the bowie knife protruding from his throat and pressed back beneath his chin until the end had caught in the angle of the jaw, and the hand that delivered the blow had been unable to remove the weapon. In the dead man's hand was his sword, clenched with a grip that defied the strength of the living. Its blade was streaked with red to the hilt.

Lifted to his feet, the general sank back to the earth with a moan and fainted. Besides his bruises he had two sword-thrusts—one through the thigh, the other through the shoulder.

The spy had suffered the least damage. Apart from a broken right arm, his wounds were such only as might have been incurred in an ordinary combat with nature's weapons. But he was dazed, and seemed hardly to know what had occurred. He shrank away from those attending him, cowered upon the ground, and uttered unintelligible remonstrances. His face, swollen by blows and stained with gouts of blood, nevertheless showed white beneath his dishevelled hair—as white as that of a corpse.

"The man is not insane," said the surgeon in reply to a question; "he is suffering from fright. Who and what is he?"

Private Tassman began to explain. It was the opportunity of his life; he omitted nothing that could in any way accentuate the importance of his own relation to the night's events. When he had

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finished his story and was ready to begin it again, nobody gave him any attention.

The general had now recovered consciousness. He raised himself upon his elbow, looked about him, and, seeing the spy crouching by a camp-fire, guarded, said simply:—

“Take that man to the parade-ground and shoot him.”

“The general’s mind wanders,” said an officer standing near.

“His mind does *not* wander,” the adjutant-general said. “I have a memorandum from him about this business; he had given that same order to Hasterlick”—with a motion of the hand toward the dead provost-marshal—“and, by God! it shall be executed.”

Ten minutes later Sergeant Parker Adderson, of the Federal army, philosopher and wit, kneeling in the moonlight and begging incoherently for his life, was shot to death by twenty men. As the volley rang out upon the keen air of the winter midnight, General Clavering, lying white and still in the red glow of the camp-fire, opened his big blue eyes, looked pleasantly upon those about him, and said, “How silent it all is!”

The surgeon looked at the adjutant-general, gravely and significantly. The patient’s eyes slowly closed, and thus he lay for a few moments; then, his face suffused with a smile of ineffable sweetness, he said faintly, “I suppose this must be death,” and so passed away.

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